柳実冬貴
対魔導学園
AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"
35試験小隊
10.魔女狩り戦争（上）
ファンタジア文庫

AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon" 対魔導学園35試験小隊

Volume – 10 - The Witch Hunt War (First Part) - The 2nd Witch-Hunt War

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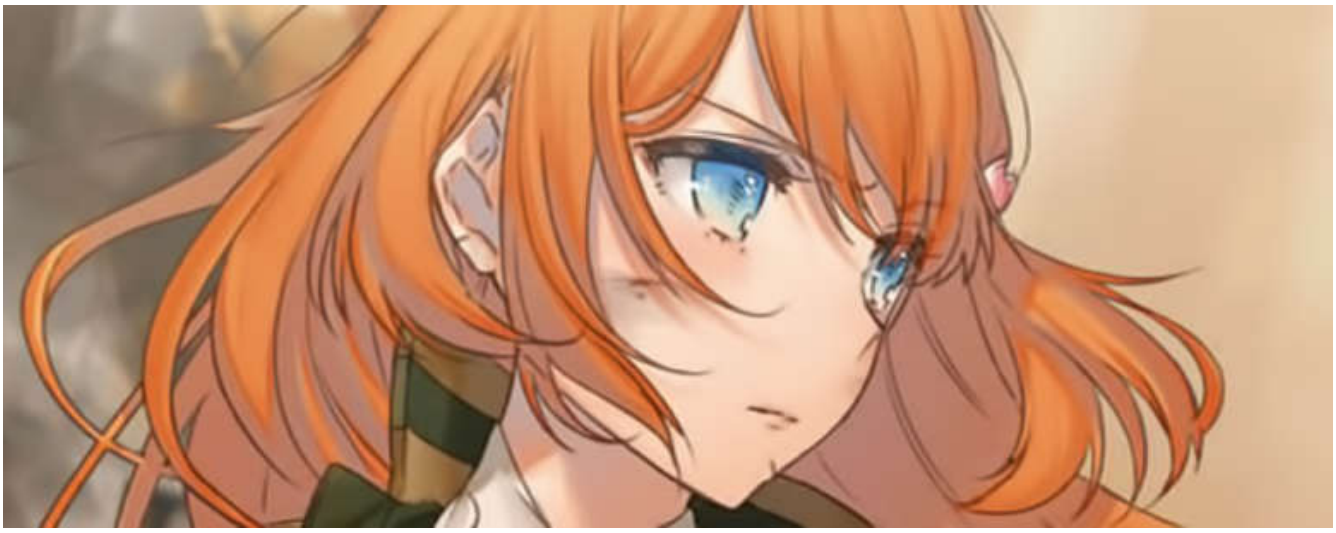
Credits



LN Published by Fujimi Fantasia Bunko

Translated by Krytyk

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AntiMagic Academy "The 35th Test Platoon"
10.The 2nd Witch-Hunt War

Prologue

To think of it, Takeru didn't have much experience in being depressed.

Or to be precise, he always immediately bounced back whenever he felt like that.

It was obvious that he was overdoing it. He was raised to be that way, so it was natural for him to force himself.

If one was to sum up the teachings of Kusanagi Double-Edged style, it would be "overdoing things".

Doing unreasonable, impossible things as it was natural.

That was why Takeru didn't know.

How does it feel to have a heart broken.

"....."

The location he was in was the home base of Heretic Alliance, the roof of the building imitating AntiMagic Academy. Under the sky of what was a part of mythological world, Takeru stared into the distance.

On the other side of the cracked-up sky there was just darkness.

He had no idea what was the identity of the darkness on the other side nor had any interest in it.

And yet, for some reason he felt like he was about to get sucked in by it. He was attracted to it as if it was saying "it'll be easier if you just come to this side".

"....."

Takeru closed his eyes and got down on one knee on top of the building's roof.

The reason he was alone here was because he wanted to organize everything in his head.

Saving Kiseki. That goal of his didn't change, he intended to go through with it.

But,

『"That's not Kiseki's wish, but Onii-chan's wish... isn't it?"』

『"How was it? Feel hurt? Can you understand Kiseki's feelings a little?"』

Kiseki didn't wish to be saved.

The salvation he thought of and salvation Kiseki wished for were in opposition.

He left the AntiMagic Academy and entered Heretic Alliance, he fought only thinking of saving his little sister. Together with newly made comrades he invaded Alchemist's First Research Facility and thought his wish would finally come true.

And yet——his outstretched hand was brushed away.

『"No."』

That single word wouldn't leave his head.

What should he do, he had not a single idea at the moment.

Before he talks with his comrades, he has to think by himself. Thinking so Takeru prepared two days in order to think by himself. Of course, there was no way he could find a clue or resolution during that time.

He managed to organize things in his head, but he still hasn't found a way to solve the underlying problem.

He couldn't find a method to make Kiseki accept his wish.

Feeling weight on his back, Takeru slightly opened his eyes.

"No one knows what's ahead, behind that sky."

The voice suppressing its intonation more than usual was that of Heretic Alliance's leader, Hoshijiro Nagaru.

She came to the roof before he realized and appeared behind him.

"You can see the cracks in the sky but you can't grasp the sense of distance, right? No matter how much you close onto those cracks and the darkness, you can't reach it. Even though this world is so small, it's a mystery."

Nagaru sat down back to back with Takeru and quietly put a cup with coffee beside him.

"Recently you hardly drink or eat anything〜. That's no good〜 you body won't hold out.

As Takeru still remained in a slump, Nagaru soundly scratched her head.

"Sorry. It's my fault. I should have planned it better and have discerned that."

"That's not true. The reason the operation had failed was because I didn't understand Kiseki. The operation went well... it's not President's fault."

He spoke with a hoarse voice.

"Any and all of it went well. With help of many people I have reached there. Other than me, everyone did their best. I was just disqualified as Kiseki's older bro... that is all."

Nagaru sighed lightly and pushed on Takeru's back a little.

"Will you quit? That's also an option. It's fine if you all don't fight. You guys... no, you were hurt enough. You've fought plenty. Even if you quit here, no one is going to blame you for it you know?"

Hearing her gently speak, Takeru immediately shook his head.

Still facing down and very weakly.

"I won't give up. No matter what I'll make her happy, I told her that."

"I see."

"But... I can't find it, a method to save her... a method to be saved by her."

"Do you mean releasing Kiseki-chan from Hyakki Yakou's curse? Or maybe rebuilding your ties with her? If you mean the former, then there's still a possibility remaining. There might be no 《Install》 charms left, but Inquisition should be storing Mephistopheles' real body. If we get that body and extract magical power of the 'Devil' property we'll be able to make 《Install》 instant charms."

There was a method left. There was a possibility.

Even though he heard that fact, Takeru was still depressed.

He knew the reason.

He realized that the problem no longer lied there.

"...Heretic Alliance's Banshees are searching for Mephistopheles' body on the other side. Since a valuable magical property dwells in that flesh it's unlikely they disposed of it. The problem is creating the instant charm and forcibly using it on Kiseki-chan. As long as Kiseki-chan doesn't want it, it won't start... that's what worries you, isn't it."

Takeru clenched his fist tightly.

That's right. Even though there was a way to save her, it couldn't be done.

Kiseki's rejection was beyond Takeru's imagination.

Acknowledging Takeru's salvation as something that isn't a salvation for her, Kiseki rejected him. In the end, Takeru only thought of saving himself, seeing through her brother's ego, Kiseki decided to stick to her own.

It could no longer be restored.

That's why, there was no longer any choice but fight.

He won't kill her. There was no way he could. Killing Kiseki would be synonymous with severing his own life.

There was no way but to forcefully make her acknowledge it.

Pointing his blade——against his little sister.

But is that really for the best? If he forcefully takes Kiseki back, will she accept his wish?

What if it solves nothing?

"Honestly speaking, there's no time to worry remaining. Currently, Kiseki-chan is in Inquisition's headquarters. And, out of her own will she is helping Inquisition. Now that the war has begun, Kiseki-chan is used as a weapon by Ootori Sougetsu. As long as that man exists, it can no longer be avoided."

Heretic Alliance's enemy are the individuals that affect entire world by themselves.

Perhaps, the time when they attempted to break out Kiseki from First Research Facility was their final chance.

Thinking that the worst result was his own fault, Takeru felt tightening in his chest.

"Unless we do something with that white head, we won't be able to save Kiseki-chan or stop the war. As long as he exists, no matter what we do he'll outsmart us... that's what I feel."

The priority target was Ootori Sougetsu.

Thinking of it, every time something happened, that man was behind it. A smile that didn't let anyone discern his thoughts appeared in Takeru's head, making him feel unspeakable anger.

Nagaru sighed tiredly and entrusted her back to Takeru's.

"You're the only one who can save Kiseki-chan. She might have rejected what you said, but even so, you're the only one she listens to."

These words weighted heavily on Takeru.

"What to do with her is up to you. Of course, I can decide on what to do instead of you too."

"....."

"I'm still the boss〜. I intend fulfill my responsibilities."

He thought of what orders Nagaru could give.

Forcibly restraining Kiseki, ordering Takeru to persuade her, these were orders she could give.

The reason she didn't do so was her consideration of him.

Still facing down, Takeru stood up.

"——I'll decide on Kiseki's matter. Please let me decide."

"....."

"I'm sorry for being selfish. I'll definitely make a decision. This time for sure, I'll do it when I stand in front of her."

He didn't have a firm objective, Takeru filled his mind with determination alone.

However, there was no meaning in remaining in slump.

There won't be any progress unless he acts.

"Nothing will change even if I think about it. Right now, I... we'll do whatever we can."

Takeru raised his face and turned around towards Nagaru.

Nagaru stood up as well, she was already facing him.

"Orders, President."

When he said that, Nagaru's hair had swayed in the wind and she squinted.

"Actually, the situation on the magic side has become very suspicious. A large-scale battle still hasn't begun in old Japan, but it's a matter of time... Europe Shelter seems to have decided to join the war regardless of whether it's East or West side."

"?! Master and Mother have decided that?!"

Nagaru nodded.

Takeru recalled that Orochi and Mother Goose were among Heretic Alliance's enemies.

"Those two have taken a neutral position. After all, when you were returning from Magic Academy they went as far as to contact me. However, they definitely aren't our allies... I don't know what's their goal, but it's not changing the world and not saving the world. 'Rewrite the world.' is what the two have said."

"...rewrite...?"

"Yup. To me, these words sound like something very dangerous. That's why I didn't think of them as allies and when I heard they decided to go to war, my thinking changed to confidence. Those people will surely make their move soon."

"....."

"If possible——I want to take down Ootori Sougetsu before that."

Nagaru seemed serious as she stared at Takeru.

"That's why, I want you guys to look for something on the other side. The location is further behind the border... further behind the Grey City... the Critical Point."

Critical Point... while Takeru wasn't knowledgeable on the Sanctuary, he heard it's a place even Inquisitors are forbidden to approach.

"Heretic Alliance is lacking in personnel 〜 ...Sage-kun and Yuzuho-chan with others are on a different mission now. It's a dangerous place, but I want your test platoon to go there alone."

Critical Point was truly the closest area to the Sanctuary, the Akashic Hazard... in other words, the place in which "Void" magical property is rampant, it's said that it deprived people of their lives if they took a single wrong step.

Although Akashic Hazard no longer spreads, the safe zone and danger zone transitions like a wave. A place that seems safe can kill people with a wave of magical power that comes a few minutes later.

"What are we looking for in there?"

When Takeru asked, Nagaru folded her arms in front of her chest.

"The Heretic Alliance's ex-leader... that is, Ouka-chan's father Mineshiro Kazuma hid a document in there. The information for which Mineshiro-san was killed for immediately after quitting Inquisition, was hidden in the Critical Point."

Hearing it was the information for which Ouka's father was killed, Takeru opened his eyes wide.

Nagaru pressed down her hair fluttering in the wind.

"We won't know what's in there unless we find it. But I can guess what is it. In the document's Mineshiro-san left behind, most likely——"

And, staring at the darkness behind the cracked-up sky she said.

"——Ootori Sougetsu's secret was written down in there. If we find it, there's a possibility of stopping this war."

The man who was the beginning for Takeru, Ouka and the others.

AntiMagic Academy's chairman, Inquisition Board's chairman——Ootori Sougetsu.

This time, Takeru's and others' battle had become one for the sake of learning who was he.

Chapter 1 - Kurogane

Takeru left the roof, going back to the building that mimicked school and walked down the hallway.

In this space, he had no idea whatsoever about the situation outside. The information was coming in, but it didn't seem like they passed it to them.

In the outside world, the "Second Witch Hunt War" had already begun.

The war didn't seem to extend to the old Japan, but the witches seems to have one-sidedly invaded the overseas using transfer magic. It was no longer a little skirmish like the border operation performed by Pureblood Party. A war in true meaning of the word had erupted.

The information on Kiseki entering the combat still hasn't reached Takeru.

Currently Kiseki was a stronger deterrent than a nuclear weapon and the ultimate weapon of Inquisition.

"....."

Takeru clenched his teeth, bearing the anger.

Treating Kiseki as a weapon and using her as a tool of was despicable.

Even if Kiseki wished to be used in that manner, he couldn't let it be as the older brother.

...I won't let them use her...! Kiseki is my little sister... not a weapon...!

The one who tortured Kiseki saying it's to help her, the man who continued to betray Takeru and his comrades, Ootori Sougetsu.

There was not a single thing known about that entity.

『"Ootori Sougetsu is shrouded with mysteries. The only thing we know, is that he looks similar to men that had appeared countless times in the shadows of history. What kind of people were they and how did they die is unknown. We have obtained a hair of one of them that was treated as a relic and examined it. When we did, we found that it's DNA matches Ootori Sougetsu's."』

These people who seemed like they were Sougetsu all without exception seemed to be involved in war.

『"Whether he is a human, a sorcerer, or maybe something other than that... in order to defeat him, we need to know what is he no matter what."』

Nagaru said that was all Heretic Alliance knew.

"....."

Takeru didn't know what was that man nor what was he thinking. But Takeru knew that he was trying to win the war by using Kiseki.

But, for what reason did he give Mistilteinn to Takeru? Did he intend to use Takeru in the same manner he uses Kiseki?

To win the war?

...no.

『"Hey, Kusanagi... lemme tell ya... what Chairman wishes for... that person intends to destroy the world..."』

Magnolia who had chased after Takeru and others said that.

That man's goal was to destroy the world.

『"See, this world is wrong... it seems like originally, magical power and magic didn't exist in this world."』

What did she mean mean by 'wrong', he wondered.

The more he he thought about it, the less he understood about that man.

Takeru shook his head, giving up on thinking.

They'll know once they find the document. It can't be helped even if he thinks about it now.

Stopping the war is connected to stopping Kiseki from being used as a weapon. If he needed to investigate that man for that, he would undertake it at full force.

Even though he said that to himself, Takeru's chest was still astir.

"——That's scary ya know? Kusanagi-kun."

Being called out to Takeru was surprised.

He eased the expression that had imperceptibly turned steep and looked forward.

When he did, he saw a girl on a wheelchair. Also, behind the wheelchair there was a figure of a girl wearing a green dress as she pushed the wheelchair. The two had an exactly same face.

"Yoshimizu...?"

Takeru called her name, still sitting on the wheelchair Yoshimizu Akira smiled lightly.

"Been a while, hasn't it? I'm happy we meet again."

Laughing shyly, Akira scratched her cheek.

"Has your consciousness returned? A-a-are you all right now?!"

Takeru wanted to run up to her, but at that moment Lapis appeared in front of him.

He involuntarily stopped moving.

"Host, please get back. It's dangerous."

"Yoshimizu isn't dangerous, is she."

"No. That fellow standing behind her is dangerous."

Fellow she says... thinking that he looked behind Akira.

A girl in green dress was glaring their way intently.

She was a spitting image of Yoshimizu Akira. Since he never heard of her having twins, thinking normally this girl would be——

"It's Kirigaya Kyouya's Relic Eater, "Nero"."

Before he could come to a conclusion, Lapis answered it.

Nero had only once before spoke with Takeru. It was back when Kyouya temporarily killed Kiseki. Since Nero wanted the contractor's revenge, she had fueled Kyouya's revenge.

Being wary of her was a correct move. He had no idea why was she pushing Yoshimizu's wheelchair, but it was hard to think of her as an ally.

The girl in dress, Nero snorted.

"What's it? Being wary of me? Worry not, I've not a speck of interest in you guys."

She spoke quickly, in a mocking manner and faced forward.

Lapis stared at her intently and slightly tilted her head.

"Having you walk around in human form is surprising. I thought of you as of existence that only incites the contractor, what is this change of mind?"

"Ahh, I see. Ya pickin' a fightt? Lemme tell ya, I've not changed at all. Unfortunately. Heck, the one wandering around for a long time without pickin' a contractor is asking me that?"

"What's incomprehensible is that appearance of yours. Now that Yoshimizu Akira-sama's consciousness has returned, that appearance can no longer inflame Kirigaya Kyouya's vengeance. When do you intend to stop mimicking others' appearance? Having a genderless personality like you stick to this appearance is a comical sight."

"Ahahahahaha! That appearance of yours is based on Kusanagi Mikoto too, ain't it! Despite being a Sacred Treasure how long ya going to drag it on, pathetic!"

Glaring at Lapis with half-opened eyes Nero burst into laughter.

Not losing to her, Lapis shut her mouth tightly, expressionless and glared at Nero.

...I wonder why Lapis is so provocative towards the other Magical Heritages. The opponents are mostly...

Since he couldn't cut into conversation, Takeru stood on the sidelines, but it had gradually started turning dangerous. Squinting, Takeru tried to stop Lapis.

"He〜yy, Nero-chan, leave it at that for now."

Squinting in the same way, Akira sighed and pacified Nero.

Being interrupted as the quarrel had reached its climax, Nero clicked her tongue and turned away, melting into the air. While it was surprising that Nero listened to Akira, seeing Akira aware of Nero's existence was also a surprise.

Moving the wheelchair by herself, Akira moved closer to Takeru. Lapis too seemed to have guessed how Takeru felt and has disappeared once again.

Even as she was in front of him, he still couldn't believe it. It really was Yoshimizu Akira.

"Are you all right now...? Is it fine to move?"

"Yep. A bit dull but all right. That said, it's been a while already since I woke up. Since the body's adjustment was necessary I couldn't say hello immediately."

".....I see."

Not knowing how he should respond, Takeru remained silent.

It was because he didn't know if she understood what situation she was in.

She joined her hands on top of her knees and faced downwards.

"I've heard everything from Kyo-cha... from Captain, you don't need to worry. I already know everything."

Raising her face, Akira smiled wryly.

She smiled brightly, but normally one wouldn't be able to stand it after hearing what happened while she was sleeping. Her disturbance when she heard the truth must have been immense.

Smiling despite that made him think Akira was a strong girl. Since he didn't know what kind of expression should he make, he averted his line of sight.

Akira's smiling expression slightly clouded over.

And suddenly, she bowed.

"I've heard from Captain that Kusanagi-kun had saved me... and that when he went berserk you did your best to stop him."

Her expression wasn't visible, but her feelings of guilt have been relayed to him strongly.

Takeru felt tightening in his chest.

"...don't lower your head. I——"

"——Thank you."

He gasped.

Akira's hands on top of her knees were trembling.

"Sacrificing something important to you, you saved me haven't you. I don't know what else should I say, but thank you."

"Stop that...! I wasn't really trying to save you. I prioritized my own issue and turned back on you...! There's nothing to thank me for...!"

Unable to bear it when he was thanked, he slightly raised his voice.

Still, Akira continued to lower her head.

drip, a tear fell on the back of her hand.

"Even so... thank you. Even if my memories are the same, I know my body and soul is't the original's. My real self is long dead, I know well that me who is here now is Yoshimizu Akira's copy. Still... when I woke up and when I learned the truth..."

"......!"

"I was happy to be alive and to meet Kyo-chan again... is what I thought."

That's why, thank you.

Akira raised her face and said so in tears.

Takeru didn't think what he did was right.

He acted selfishly and failed, then gave priority to saving whom he could at the moment.

A person who acts like that does not deserve to be thanked.

He gave priority to other things. That's why being shown gratitude was honestly hard for him.

Takeru turned around on a heel to leave the place, as if to run away.

"Kusanagi-kun!"

When she called out to stop him, he involuntarily stopped.

"I can somewhat tell that you blame yourself, Kusanagi-kun."

"....."

"But it's a fact that you have saved me. I won't tell you to be proud of it though."

"....."

"...I don't want you to think you have accomplished nothing. At the very least, you have saved me!"

As if his chest was being clenched, Takeru felt tightening in his chest.

He was ashamed at himself for turning his back to her.

Escaping without taking responsibility for what he did was something a coward would do.

Even if he wasn't able to save Kiseki, no matter the reason, it was his decision that resulted with Akira being saved. And yet he let himself be crushed by guilt, looking away from the fact he saved her, he was the pinnacle of fools.

She was grateful to him for being saved, if he rejected her gratitude Akira would be hurt. Telling her that he didn't want to save her would be similar to telling her she shouldn't be alive.

Takeru clenched his teeth and stretched his back.

"...I'm happy that you're fine, Yoshimizu. But it's true that I can't be proud of it."

"...thank you."

"I don't regret having the means to save my little sister being used on you. Even if I had priorities, I didn't hesitate to save you. I want you to know that."

After just telling her the truth, Takeru left the location.

He was angry at his immature self. He couldn't forgive himself for not congratulating Akira sincerely when he first saw her. Even though he should have learned about hearts of people, his endlessly selfish self was unbearably miserable.

* * *

After closing AntiMagic Academy's chairman office's door, Kurogane Hayato stopped moving.

His refined appearance that looked like a sculpture concealing a blade was not swayed by emotions.

However, in the depths of his eyes was swirling anger many times stronger than a human's.

Hayato closed his eyes to quell the anger and clenched his fist.

"Senpai!"

Coming from the corridor was a man and woman.

They were wearing black inquisitor uniforms. In other words, the two were Hayato's subordinates, members Zeroth Extermination Police, the "EXE".

The man was young, with brown hair and slender, firm body. His appearance could be seen as frivolous, but in his facial expression dwelled a resolution of a professional Inquisitor. The other person was a woman with long, wavy hair. Even though she looked gentle, her foundation seemed to be very dignified.

The man's name was Jougasaki Mamoru and the woman's was Himemiya Iori. Both of them were comrades Hayato put his trust in.

After moving in front of Hayato, they corrected their posture by saluting.

"What did Chairman say? What happens to EXE?"

"Mamoru. That's too rude, calm yourself a little. Also, don't call him 'senpai' but 'captain'."

As Mamoru flared up with a strong momentum, Iori calmed him down.

He made an unconvinced expression and spread his arms wide.

"There's no way I can be calm! It's the crisis of EXE's existence!"

"I know. And that is why you should calm down. Even if we're to yell, it won't change the result."

While the two contrasting two were quarreling beside, Hayato turned on his heel and started to walk away.

The two followed him in a hurry.

"Please answer me Senpai...! What are the orders from above? What should we do?!"

"There should be a notification soon enough. Wait for it."

Hearing the cold response, Mamoru furrowed his eyebrows.

"...we can't do that right? We too should have the right to know. Not just us, members who aren't contractors are waiting as well!"

"....."

"EXE isn't participating even though war is in under way...! Magnolia and others are in action, it's strange for just us to be on standby."

Iori grasped Mamoru's shoulder and shook her head.

Mamoru knew well he was being disrespectful. The instruction from higher-ups to have EXE on standby was extremely unusual to the point he flared up at Hayato, who usually trust his comrades.

After the border's invasion done by witches, despite the situation evolving into a full-fledged war not even once there was an order for EXE to sortie.

There was a possibility of enemy appearing in any location of old Japan using transfer magic. Inquisition's headquarters and branches have dispatched all the Spriggans to the city. They have arranged it as to cope with attack any time.

But meanwhile, the strongest force of Inquisition, EXE, has been ordered to be on standby. They weren't ordered to protect the headquarters nor any of the VIPs, just to be on standby.

In this outrageous emergency the EXE was ordered to do nothing.

"All of this is because mass-produced Relic Eaters were completed. Are we going to be dumped?"

Swinging his arms in frustration, Mamoru sought an answer from Hayato.

Hayato moving his legs.

Mamoru and Iori waited for him to speak.

"There was a notice from the Chairman just now. Currently existing EXE is temporarily dismantling."

"...as I thought...!"

In annoyance Mamoru hit his palm with a fist. Iori also predicted that, but her pupils shook in agitation.

"Don't misunderstand. Even though it's dismantled, it doesn't mean it's disappearing."

"...what do you mean?"

"It's not only EXE that's being dismantled, the first, second and third troops are the same."

"?! F-first? Isn't that the one that adapted mass-produced type..."

As Mamoru made a questioning look, Hayato turned away.

"They're integrated into Extermination Riot Police and scheduled to be reorganized as newly-made EXE. Since it's wartime, you can predict when will that happen. Spriggans and Seelies will also be under the command of EXE."

"....."

"That's all I was called in for this time. I'll say it again, EXE is not disappearing. After it calms down it'll be reorganized. That's all."

Hearing Hayato's blunt report, Mamoru had strength leave her legs and he fell on his butt.

"What〜... hey, Himemiyaa, your prediction was off."

"I told you that it's something I think is a possibility. I told you three times to calm down, haven't I."

With an amazed expression Iori laughed at Mamoru who laughed like a young boy.

Hayato stood unmoving in front of the two.

"Senpai's being too reserved. Even if you tell us that, there's no problem."

"It's not 'senpai' but 'captain'. Good grief... how many years do you think has passed since you graduated from school. How long do you intend to stay in student mood."

"Senpai will always be my senpai right? When it comes to work, age or being a man, Senpai is my senpai. Right, Senpai?"

Mamoru raised his thumb with a refreshing smile. Iori sighed dejected.

"Being like this in the same troop with Senpai is my pride. That's why having EXE disappear would mean the place I belong to disappears."

"I get it... really, you haven't changed at all since you were test platoon's captain."

"People don't change so easily. Oh, right. Since the troops are being integrated, that obviously means Senpai will be the commander, doesn't it?"

Although Mamoru asked with a smile, Hayato stared down at him expressionlessly, then he lowered his line of sight at the captain's emblem on his own chest, then touched it with his fingers.

Hayato removed the captain's emblem and flipped it like a coin to Mamoru.

Mamoru caught the flying captain's emblem in a hurry.

"...eh?"

He looked up at Hayato in shock.

Hayato turned away and started to walk off again.

"I leave EXE to you. Support it until I'm back."

"....."

"...what do you mean?"

"I'm leaving the headquarters for the time being. I leave the rest to you."

Saying just that, Hayato started to walk away swiftly.

"I don't get it! You can't leave without expl——"

Mamoru stood up and was about to chase after him, but Hayato glared at him over the shoulder. The cold stare directed at him was as sharp as a blade and sent chills down Mamoru's spine.

"——No matter what happens, don't follow me. You should fulfill your duties."

Even though they didn't show on his face, Hayato's feelings hidden deep in his pupils caused Mamoru's body to stiffen.

Mamoru knew that going against Hayato when his eyes looked like that was suicidal.

After that, Hayato left the place without looking back even once.

Left behind, Mamoru and Iori were unable to chase after him.

An hour after Hayato separated from his subordinates.

He was driving in a car through the town.

It was raining outside and there was poor visibility. It was still evening, but the light barely managed to reach the ground.

The city light's haven't changed from before and were still peaceful. Although evacuation of the citizens had begun because of the Pureblood Party's assault, there still were many people in the town.

A company employee wearing a suit making a call with his mobile phone, a housewife shopping merrily, schoolgirls lively engaged in conversation. Terrorist attack set up by Valhalla happened half a year ago, after that Hyakki Yakou had gone berserk, then there was the border invasion by Pureblood Party... so many disasters have occurred and yet the people of old Japan didn't have any sense of crisis.

It hasn't been announced that the enemy can appear anywhere using transfer magic. If the truth was announced, it would intensify the confusion and make it known that nowhere was safe.

This city was the safest place as it had the Inquisition's headquarters in it.

That is what was conveyed through media like the TV.

The general public didn't know in just how big a crisis was the old Japan. Of course, this entire region was in the immediate vicinity of the Inquisition's headquarters so it was true it was being protected. Rather than lead to a pointless confusion, this fake peace was the best situation for the Inquisition.

However, Hayato predicted.

That before long, this place will turn into a battlefield.

"....."

He stopped on the red light and looked at the rear-view mirror.

Rain continued to fall and it seemed like some accident has occurred since there was a traffic jam on the road.

Staring at the mirror Hayato continued to hit the handle with his fingers. Normally, he didn't have a habit like that.

tap, **tap tap**, he kept moving his finger as if to engrave a rhythm in it.

What he gazed at that was reflected in the mirror, was the driver sitting in the seat of a black van, three vehicles behind him.

He clearly looked like a civilian. His appearance and gestures were like that of a gloomy office worker. It was at him that Hayato stared.

Five seconds, eight seconds... ten seconds.

When he continued to stare without averting his gaze——his eyes met the man's, who shouldn't have been paying attention to him.

Hayato stopped making a rhythm with his finger and squeezed the handle.

——**dngg**...!

The moment the signal changed to blue, Hayato stepped on the accelerator with all he had and turned the steering wheel.

The tires momentarily blown water backwards, then rotated raising a smoke.

The car suddenly accelerated and moved to the left. There was no road in there. He crossed through the side walk and drove straight into an alley between two buildings.

Hayato drove the car squeezing it through a space normally a car wouldn't pass through. The vehicle's frame rubbed the walls sending sparks. Even though the door was blown off, Hayato continued to step on the accelerator as he sat in the driver's seat.

The tires were punctured and smoke rose up from the car's hood.

At the same time as his car stopped, he kicked the wind shield breaking it and escaping from the car to the outside.

"Damn it! Just when did he notice us!?"

From the black van three vehicles behind Hayato's car a group of people has come down.

There was ten of them altogether. All of them Inquisitors.

They were in black. In other words, they were people newly integrated to the EXE. Each of them held a firearm and was ready to fight any time.

"He noticed right from the start. Don't underestimate Kurogane Hayato. Even without a Relic Eater he is a monster beyond monsters. The moment you relax you'll all get killed."

"What do we do?"

"Six people are to block the entrances to the alley. Remaining three will go in with me directly."

"We're supposed to tail him. We weren't ordered to capture him, were we?"

"Now that we've been found out there's no choice but to catch him."

The man who looked like the captain said so and took out a box similar to a black coffin from the trunk.

Inside was a small railgun... on its body "The Malleus Maleficarum Production Model „Guillotine“ " was engraved.

It was a mass-produced Relic Eater.

"We have permission. There's no problem if we kill him in the worst case."

The man held the railgun, turned it around in his hands and shouldered it.

The six people who received the order divided in two and went to block the exit to the alley.

Taking three people, the Captain followed Hayato back into the alley and passed through the car he was riding in.

Shortly after chasing after him, they discovered Hayato leisurely walking in the back alley.

Hayato's footsteps resounded as he went left on a T-junction.

His subordinates preceded the Captain and chased after Hayato.

The moment his subordinates went around the corner vigilant and were about to aim their muzzles,

——Just when the breechblock was about to slide backwards, the gun itself decomposed.

"——Eh?"

Immediately after the weapon he held was broken to pieces, someone's palm rushed at him from the front.

A palm heel strike. Unable to avoid it, his subordinate had his chin and nose broken, then blown away onto the wall.

The member who smashed onto the wall with the backs of their heads lost consciousness and were bleeding from head and nose.

Two of his subordinates froze seeing all that happen in an instant, then a shadow appeared right in front of them.

They were unable to react. It was speed that couldn't be caught up with using human dynamic vision.

One person was kicked in the face and squashed, the other had his face grasped and was thrown onto the ground.

The hem of his coat fluttered then fell according to gravity. Right in front of the Captain, there way Hayato still remaining in the same posture after smashing his subordinate's head into the ground. Even though each of them had a gun, they were all incapacitated before they could fire a single shot.

It didn't take even a second to complete this series of tragedy.

Feeling dryness in his throat, the Captain directed Guillotine's muzzle at Hayato.

"Change of plan. All members, go in."

He contacted his comrades through the radio and focused his conscious.

He had a Relic Eater. Even if the opponent was Kurogane Hayato, he could easily overwhelm him using the inhuman power.

No matter how strong the opponent was, he was just a human. There was no way he could lose. Encouraging himself, the Captain raised his hand forward.

"Desiring with supreme ardor——"

And, he expanded the magical circle to active Witch Hunter——

——**fwshh**!

The moment he heard sound of the air being cut, it was already too late. The moment he thought Hayato disappeared, a shock ran through his right shoulder from above. Hayato leaped and performed a heel drop using his own weight.

"Ghha...!"

The Witch Hunter form activation was interrupted, the Captain fell on his knees.

He was careless. As not to cause a commotion, he was wrong to set a foot in the back alley without Witch Hunter form. He should have entered complete Witch Hunter form beforehand.

Soon after he reflected on it, a blade shone in the darkness.

The shine headed for his right hand that held guillotine. After blinking what the Captain saw was his own hand and the Relic Eater rolling on the ground.

He was completely sealed. He couldn't invoke any magic without the Relic Eater in his hand.

When he raised his face, he could see Hayato pass the anti-magical knife from his left hand to the right.

——I'll be killed.

Immediately after the Captain prepared himself, Hayato twisted his upper body while holding the knife in his hand and threw it backwards.

Exactly at the same time, Captain's subordinate appeared from behind the corner of the alley.

The knife pierced through his right foot and the subordinate stumbled with a scream. In a split second Hayato pulled out a large handgun from his pocket and under his arm he shot towards the back of T-junction. The bullets were anesthesia ones. At the same time Hayato hit the subordinate's head with anesthesia bullet, Hayato turned his body around and fired all the remaining bullets towards the right corner of the T-junction.

Probably vigilant after seeing the first one get done in, the remaining five didn't show themselves on the T-junction. With a calm motion, Hayato turned towards the T-junction.

And, he threw two grenades attached to his waist belt.

The screams of the members hidden in the alley echoed.

There was a flash and explosion of smoke.

At the same time he could hear violent coughing, Hayato rushed into the T-junction at breakneck speed. The Captain who had his arm cut off was pressing on the cut off part with his opposite hand and stared into the T-junction shrouded in smoke. There was a sound of impact and shooting as well as more screams, but he couldn't see anything because of the smoke. The screams too, went silent as if nothing happened just three seconds later.

"...ghh..."

While trembling, the Captain breathed in the smoke.

Even without seeing it, he knew. They were wiped out. In just an instant, nine of his comrades were wiped out.

He was the one who underestimated Hayato, the Captain admonished himself. Hayato was an Inquisitor who worked as a Dullahan for long years. Just how horrifying he was, only now the Captain was able to understand.

Picking up Guillotine with his left hand, he gave priority to completing the Witch Hunter form. He resumed the interrupted process of taking the Witch Hunter form, quietly expanding the magical circle. There was no need for the Relic Eater to formulate the operative procedure. Especially, the Guillotine was connected to the magical power and brains of the witches captured by Inquisition, which in turn made the magic's activation quicker than that of the existing Relic Eaters.

A steel-colored armor wrapped around the Captain.

The Witch Hunter form was completed. There was no time to reconnect the arm, but the bleeding was stopped immediately.

I can do it——the moment he thought that, arms have extended through the smoke towards him. A palm approached the Captain and grasped his face. In addition to that, a muzzle was pressed against his left eye.

He raised a drawn-out voice.

A pair of eyes harboring cold light inside were glaring at him from the smoke.

Hayato waited for the smoke to clear up before quietly speaking.

"You bunch are the first troop. Why are you following me?"

"T-there's no need to ans——"

The moment the Captain has gone against Hayato's command, the gun's trigger was pulled. It must have been re-loaded with live ammunition. A sound of gunfire has sounded, the Captain's eye was ruptured by the bullet. A heartbreaking cry echoed through the alley.

The handgun Hayato used was a 0.50 caliber automatic. An ordinary human would had his head blown way and died. The reason he was let off with just an eye, was thanks to the Relic Eater's strengthening.

"It's not an anti-magic bullet. Your skull won't crumble even with a few shots."

"Aghh...! Gahh...!"

"However, even with Relic Eater's strengthening, regeneration of an eyeball is difficult. Guillotine specializes in attack power and defense, having nearly no regenerative abilities. You can be even cornered and rendered unable to continue the battle with 0.50 caliber bullets."

This time Hayato put the muzzle into the Captain's mouth and asked coldly.

"On whose orders, why are you following me?"

"Kughh... n-no o..."

"I see."

Hayato mercilessly pulled the trigger many times. The Captain's screams roared along with the gunshots. The bullets ricocheted inside of his throat, striking the soft meat. Still, he didn't die. He vomited blood and his breath turned rough, but even so, a human strengthened by a Relic Eater won't die with just this much as long as anti-magic bullets aren't used.

The Captain who lost one arm had no means of attacking Hayato. In the first place, there was no chance for him to attack. All he could do is to desperately clutch the Relic Eater strengthening him.

With only three bullets left in the magazine, Hayato pushed the muzzle against' the Captain's right eye. The Captain continued to breathe out painfully, with a whistling sound.

"If possible I don't want to shoot a coworker any more than this. Regenerate your vocal cords and answer. Or do you want to have two artificial eyes?"

"...ghh...ahh..."

"Why are you following me."

Hayato asked for the third time with an emotionless voice.

The Captain shed tears from his right eye. It wasn't a tear of fear, it came from resignation and pain.

He fell on his knees and replied.

"...C-Chairman's...orders...you're suspected...to have stolen...Mephist...opheles... body..."

"Continue."

Hayato let go of the Captain and listened while replacing his gun's magazine.

The Captain who lost his will to fight continued while breathing painfully.

"Orders are...to capture...and interrogate."

"Was that all you were ordered?"

"...yes..."

"...I see. Well done."

——*pshh*

After he finished reloading, Hayato pulled the trigger in rapid succession.

Needles were stuck between the right eye and the orbit, in a spot that wasn't enhanced. The Captain has fallen down without letting out any voice.

Hayato picked up the Captain's intercom and listened to it. He heard the communication coming from First Extermination Riot Police. Other members were waiting for the Captain's reply. However, it seemed like all the members who have rushed into the alley were defeated by Hayato.

Judging from the situation, a sniper team was supposed to aim from the building's roof.

"....."

If what the Captain of first Extermination Riot Police said was correct, Hayato was being chased under suspicion of stealing Mephistopheles' body. A few days ago, certainly Mephisto's body was being convoyed and the body had gone missing.

However, it was unlikely he would be tailed for being a suspect. If that was the case, they wouldn't tail him, instead they would directly issue an arrest warrant.

Then, why would they bother doing something as sluggish as tailing. If they explored the location of the Relic eater they would find his location instantly, without having to tail him.

That meant,

"...my objective was found out, is what it means."

Hayato dropped the intercom, once again loaded live ammunition in his 0.50 caliber gun, then pulled the slide.

And, once again his footsteps resounded as he slowly disappeared in the darkness of the alley.

Chapter 2 - In Order to Move Forward

Late at night, after finishing dinner Takeru headed to a certain place before returning to his room.

『"You should be able to relax yourself in there before the operation starts〜."』

Listening to what Nagaru said he went there, wondering just what was in there.

It seemed like she would explain the operation tomorrow, so he could get some good rest today.

He arrived in front of the furthest room and was suddenly struck with nostalgia.

"This is..."

Seeing the familiar door, he unconsciously extended his hand to the doorknob.

A little bit tense, Takeru pulled the doorknob and opened the door.

A gentle light of a fluorescent lamp leaked outside, he set a foot inside of the room.

In there, was the same sofa that was always there, the same tea, same comrades.

"...our platoon room?"

It was the place Takeru used to belong to. The scent of tea, smell of gun oil, scent of the cypress furniture. The familiar table and sofa. On the bookshelf there was a plastic Dragoon decorating it, Ikaruga's worthless magazines, Usagi's cookbooks, Ouka's references.

And naturally, his comrades relaxing on the sofa.

Involuntarily, tears pooled in his eyes.

As his eyes moistened, the comrades sitting on the sofa raised their faces looking towards him.

When Takeru hurriedly tried to look away, everyone stood up in unison.

"Wait, ehh? Takeru, why are you crying?!"

"What happened?! Who made you cry?!"

"Are you hurt?!"

Mari, Ouka and Usagi ran up to Takeru anxiously peeking into his face.

Takeru's face reddened and he desperately tried to look away.

"No... it's nothing really, it's nothing..."

"There's no way it's nothing, is there?! Where does it hurt?! Show me!"

"It is the first time I have seen Kusanagi cry... it seems like he's finally overburdened."

"I've seen it before, but why would he cry at a time like this..."

When Ouka said that, Usagi and Mari glared as if to say "I can't overlook that".

Seeing that, Ikaruga who was still sitting on the sofa chuckled.

Takeru knew well why was he crying. The moment he took a step inside, he embraced a sense of security as if he came back home.

From being in this place.

From having his comrades be with him.

It was all so nostalgic and dear to him that tears have poured without stopping.

He once again understood just how much did he love this place.

Yeah... I really am no good without comrades...

While it was obvious, he once again realized it. It might have been a betrayal for Kiseki, but he didn't regret not giving up on his comrades. He thought so from the depth of his heart.

After intruding into the First Research Facility and failing to rescue Kiseki, Ouka told him not to shoulder everything alone, thus Takeru decided to consult with his comrades. This room was prepared by Hoshijiro Nagaru and completely imitated their platoon room in AntiMagic Academy to allow them to rest comfortably. There was an immediate effect. Even though it was just made to resemble their room, this familiar scenery healed Takeru's heart to a surprising degree.

"——Eh, how is that betraying Kiseki-chan?"

Immediately after he finished explaining the circumstances, that was the first thing Mari said.

Usagi sitting beside stared right at Mari and Ouka shook her head with a sigh. Ikaruga seemed to have sensed something interesting and stared curiously at Mari.

Takeru explained gain.

"L-like I said, what she wants is a double suicide with me... my wish for her to live happily is an exact opposite of that. That's why she..."

"I don't get why would she want to suicide though? If she dies ain't it over. She won't be happy."

"....."

When she said something very obvious and right on the target, Takeru couldn't respond anyhow.

No, he understood what Mari was saying.

Or rather, he really agreed with her, but coming up with a conclusion so simply wasn't a good thing. Thinking of the suffering and despair Kiseki tasted, it couldn't be helped that she wished to die and hated the world. Well, precisely because it couldn't be helped that Takeru swore not to let it end as she wishes.

Both Usagi and Mari raised a cup with tea to their mouth, appalled.

"It is as you say but... why are you being so straightforward? While it is certain that a double suicide is out of question, please consider Kiseki-san's feelings. If you don't, we won't find a way to resolve this."

"Eh? Why? There ain't a way he can understand Kiseki-chan's feelings. Even if you tell him to experience same thing, it's impossible, I'd hate that. In the end, it's not something other people can understand."

Saying that out, Mari folded her arms in front of her chest.

Sitting opposite of her Ouka and Usagi seemed both amazed, squinting.

"You really... are dry sometimes. It's as if you're looking at yourself."

"Don't lump me together with you, who just can't read the mood. I'm not reading the mood now. You can't read it, I'm not reading it. OK?"

"Uhh? Ahh, well, yeah...? No, wait——what's the difference there?!"

"I ain't dry. I really want Kiseki-chan to be happy. Rather, since I want her to live and be happy, there's no way I can sympathize with Kiseki-chan."

Ohh...?

With that, Usagi and Ouka were overpowered by Mari.

After that, the three began to debate arguing over details.

Takeru drank the tea prepared by Usagi and looked at this scene with an indescribable mood.

Strangely, now he felt that he could rely on his comrades with things he was thinking seriously about all alone.

These girls are amazin'...

When Takeru laughed impressed,

"Nikaido is just like Kusanagi."

Ikaruga who sat next to Takeru said that.

"...I don't think I am that simplistic."

"I wonder? You're always like that, just doing things you want to do."

He had no intention of denying that, but this selfishness of his was the reason of the failure on the matter of Kiseki.

"No matter how much you try to deny yourself and try to consider your little sisters feelings, it's pointless, 'cause you're an idiot. Nikaido was infected with that idiocy."

"Yer horrible."

"You see, everyone here was influenced by you quite a bit. Didn't you notice? It's not that they changed, you changed everyone."

Being told that, Takeru furrowed his eyebrows.

"...even if that's true, I wonder if that's a good thing..."

Takeru rest his back on the sofa and looked up at the ceiling.

Honestly speaking, he had gone through countless painful experiences. It had become better as compared to his childhood and middle school days, but his roots did not change.

In this case too... this personality of mine is the cause.

He was aware that he was being pushy.

Ikaruga put her herbal tea on the table and making an expression as if she wanted to react with "ha?", she moved her face closer to his. Staring intently into his eyes, she said.

"Of course it's a good thing."

Always neutral and acting suggestively Ikaruga affirmed that. Surprised, Takeru looked at her questioningly "why are you so sure?", but Ikaruga said nothing else and sighing, she returned to her original posture. It seemed as if she was about to call him an idiot. Still in shock, Takeru changed to a topic he was curious about.

"Speaking of which... how does Kanaria feel? She's been examined today too, right?"

"Her consciousness returned and she's steadily recovering. There was no damage to her brain, but her brain still remembers the pain it felt, so it should take a few days more until she'll be able to move like she used to."

Ikaruga must have been relieved. Until yesterday she seemed slightly discouraged, restless, but she's already come back to how she was now.

Since Kanaria lost consciousness on the other side, Ikaruga didn't leave her at all. She stayed beside her even asleep, when ex-Seelies and witches in charge of recovery magic examined her, she was present, demonstrating incredible over-protectiveness.

"But for now, she is to rest unconditionally. She said she would participate in the mission but I didn't listen and tied her to the bed."

"...tied her... you mean, physically?"

"That's right. Since she's absurdly strong, I tied her down with adamantium wire."

Will she really be able to untie that, not wishing her badly though. Kanaria's appearance as she rampages tied to bed came to his mind and he made a cramped-up smile.

"I'll tell you this, Kanaria's case too, was solved thanks to Kusanagi."

"I didn't do a thing."

"I mean it's thanks to you changing me."

Again she made an expression as if she wanted to call him idiot.

I wonder why, it felt as if everyone had thorns today.

When Takeru soundly scratched his cheek,

"——Hey, you listenin' Takeru?! We're talking about you here!"

"Yess?!"

Suddenly, Mari leaned on the table and stuck her face towards him.

Pouting, she moved her face in front of Takeru's.

"I'm well aware that you're depressed now, Takeru. Everyone else is the same. We know. It's because you're depressed that you ponder about it all alone."

"N-no, I..."

He intended to consult it with everyone right from the start... but approached like this, having his head caught in two hands, he was unable to respond anyhow.

"But that——is absolutely no good!"

"You, what..."

"Cuz' Takeru's an idiot!"

Even you're saying that, Takeru's expression stretched.

Mari was quite serious. What could be seen in her eyes wasn't contempt nor mockery.

It was trust.

"Takeru's always being an idiot. Everyone in the 35th Test Platoon knows that."

"...M-Mari?"

"Everyone here was saved by your idiotic straightforwardness. That's why there's no use thinking about it."

"....."

"Takeru, see I... I want you to believe in yourself a little."

It seemed like everyone else felt the same and didn't try to stop Mari.

It was unknown whether she was praising him or criticizing him, but Mari was at least serious.

Ouka nodded, agreeing with Mari.

"Let me say this, when you first said that you'll shoulder half of my burden, I thought 'what is this guy talking about'. We have barely spoke since we met, for someone like that to say such a thing... even to me, you looked like a strange guy."

She said so keenly while crossing her arms.

"However, I was the one whose heart was struck by these words. It can be said that your straightforwardness saved me."

If it was Ouka from before, she probably would never say such a thing.

It was thanks to Takeru that she has become like this, is what Ouka said.

"...me as well, I have been always encouraged by Kusanagi's words. Your words, how do I say it... for better or worse made me shake off hesitation. I cannot say that I have overcome my complex but... it's thanks to you that I have taken a step forward."

Usagi too, joined her hands and repositioning herself on the sofa continued after the two.

"It is because of you being like that, I- I want to be together for——not that! With you! I t-thought of staying with you."

Fidgeting, with bright red face Usagi finished speaking and embarrassed, she covered her face with both hands. For some reason, Takeru too had become embarrassed.

"That's how it is. Kusanagi, you saved everyone here. You can be proud of that. Have some pride in things other than your swordsmanship."

Ikaruga shrugged and the other members agreed with her.

Furthermore,

"Exactly."

Suddenly, Lapis has appeared on top of his knees.

Everyone in the room was taken aback from surprise.

She always appeared unexpectedly, but having her appear on top of his knees made even Takeru raise his voice. Lapis quietly sat on top of his knees, as if proudly claiming them to be her seat. She was still expressionless.

"Host is always disinterested in our circumstances. He's a saving bastard who saves people without asking any questions."

"...why saving bastard?"

What kind of bastard is that...

"With just his ego, Host ends up saving others. Regardless whether they are human, he's an idiotic person who stretches a helping hand even to a Magical Heritage like me. On top of that, he's aware of himself being an idiot and naive, making it even worse."

Being told that by Lapis really hurt.

However, Lapis softened her expression slightly and continued.

"But, that is what I love about Host."

" " "Love?!" " "

The three others were surprised and raised a hysteric voice, then glared at Takeru. Ikaruga alone just whistled.

After she finished saying what she wanted to say, Lapis squeezed Takeru's pants tightly.

"That's why... Host whom I love... should be proud of himself."

"……!!"

"If not, I who am in love with Host will seem pitiful."

Her a little downhearted gesture made Takeru feel his heart being squeezed.

When Takeru blundered and his heart started to beat strongly,

"Grahhh! I wanted to say thatttt!"

Striking the table with her hands, Mari leaned over again.

She approached right in front of his face.

And slapped his cheeks with both her hands.

It just woke him up, there was no pain.

"So, that's how it is Takeru."

She deflated her cheeks that were puffed up and stared at Takeru seriously.

"We were saved by your desperate idiotic straightforwardness. That's what we like about you. If you deny yourself, what is to be with us who are looking up to you."

The two hands that slapped him gently wrapped around Takeru's cheeks.

"You just have to relay your feelings to Kiseki-chan. If she doesn't understand them, you just have to continue stretch your hand to her like you always do. The method matters not. You just have to teach that girl happiness, as she doesn't know the outside world."

"……"

"You don't have to change. Kiseki-chan is the one who has to. It's your duty to change her."

After saying so, Mari let go of him.

Unexpectedly, Ouka sitting next to Mari smiled to him.

"Believe in yourself a little. You've declared war, you just have to go through the siblings' quarrel with all you have."

Snapping out of his mood, Takeru stared at his comrades one after another.

Everyone seemed to feel same as Mari and nodded towards him.

Takeru stared at his own fist.

Believing in himself.

It was the first time he was told to do something as simple and yet as difficult.

He didn't come this far because he believed in himself. He was just desperate, not knowing any other method. With just his stubbornness, he forced his own desires on the others.

Takeru didn't believe in anything.

Believe in myself... huh.

He wasn't a honest enough a person to believe without reserve. After all, he failed many times and hurt others because he was prone to anger. His skills and commanding as the captain were equal to none. It might have been inevitable that he didn't believe in himself.

But his comrades believed in him, they looked up to him.

And yet, he didn't believe in himself?

...that can't be...!

Until now, he did all this by himself.

Questioning himself repeatedly, he pierced through all with his ego.

If he's to pierce through all——he has to believe in himself.

"...you're right. If you all believe in me, it's out of question for me not to believe in myself."

Fight. No matter how much he's rejected, he'll continue to outstretch his hand.

He decided to do so. He had to adhere to what he said.

To believe in himself and move forward.

Takeru clenched his palm and thanked everyone.

"Thanks for giving me a good kick, everyone."

"A 'kick'... say at least we 'pushed' your back."

"No, I've been 'kicked' there. Thanks to that, my doubts have cleared up."

While saying so, Takeru stood up.

And in slightly embarrassed manner, he said.

"I'll stop thinking about it. We'll just do what we can now. Everyone, can you go on for a little longer?"

"Takeru... this is where you say 'follow me', isn't it."

When Takeru spoke Ouka made a wry smile.

"N-no, I mean... I'm going to involve you all in it."

As he started to scratch his head soundly, Mari leaned over for the third time.

"You shouldn't say thatt! We want to be involved! If you tell us it's not related to us, we gonna slap you up!"

"S-sorry."

Takeru apologized like he usually did, causing Mari to sigh.

"Well, that is what makes Kusanagi. Being just a little bit unreliable might be in fact good."

"Well, 'follow me' might not suit him after all."

Usagi and Ikaruga chuckled.

He gave his thanks to everyone supporting him, once again facing forward he started to run.

In front of the platoon's room door, grasping its doorknob unmoving, stood Kirigaya Kyouya.

When he was about to enter, he heard the conversation inside and accidentally, he ended up listening to it all.

"...tch."

Kyouya clicked his tongue and hunched, he thrust his hands into pockets and attempted to leave the place.

"Heyy, you can't run away, Kyo-chan!"

When he stopped in place and looked towards where voice has come from, he saw Yoshimizu Akira on the wheelchair in the middle of hallway, she was watching him with a wry smile.

Kyouya made an awkward expression and clicked his tongue again.

"Shut up. Don't you call me "kyo-chan". Call me "captain"."

Akira rode on the wheelchair and lined up next to Kyouya.

"Now, "thank you for your help", "I'm sorry for doing horrible things", you need to say it properly."

"I just have to repay him what I owe."

"You're going to help Kusanagi-kun out, right?"

When Akira grinned broadly, Kyouya strongly shook his head and started walking.

She puffed up her cheeks and murmured "obstinate" to Kyouya's back.

"Since you're joining 35th platoon for now, if you properly apologize they'll surely welcome you."

"I've not intention joining Small Fry Platoon."

"Why? If you're helping them out, isn't it better if you're together?"

Kyouya stopped moving, looking down on Akira he grasped his own shoulder.

On his left shoulder he had stars of all his comrades attached. When he vowed to devote himself to revenge, he attached them in order to not forget their chagrin.

To dispel their regrets, he lived just to take revenge for them.

But it was different now. He could assert it was different.

Because beside him, he had someone to protect.

Right now, he believed that on his shoulder dwelled feelings of his dead comrades rather than their chagrin. In order to protect Akira, Kyouya borrowed their strength.

"I won't enter Small Fry Platoon. Until I die, I'll be the captain of 15th platoon, until I die... I'll be your childhood friend."

Once again Kyouya started to walk.

Akira stopped moving the wheelchair.

Kyouya stopped moving, he just turned his head to look at Akira.

"...what is it."

Even though moon didn't exist in this world, moonlight lit up the two.

With a trembling voice Akira asked Kyouya.

"Can I... really be Yoshimizu Akira...?"

"....."

"Can I... properly be Kyo-chan's childhood friend...?"

Kyouya could feel the anxiety bleeding out of her.

It wasn't that Kyouya couldn't understand what was she thinking. Akira was a clone, she couldn't be sure that she's herself. One of the Seelies from the Heretic Alliance said that people born through cloning technology can be mentally confused.

However, Kyouya went "so what" and laughed off Akira's confusion.

He faced forward again, not bothered by her worries in the least. He just answered truthfully.

"Akira is already dead. She won't come back again."

"....."

"But, you're the same Akira for me. I don't care whether it's the original or the clone. If there are two Akiras, I'll protect both with my life on the line."

Akira's eyes have become slightly watery as she looked at Kyouya.

Turned with his back to her, Kyouya started walking again.

"Don't you ask me something as stupid again. You should just stay silent and beside me. Just remain the way you are."

Tears spilled from Akira's eyes in silence.

Akira could understand that he was being his usual, blunt self. Even if she was a clone, she could tell he was the same Kyouya that was in her memories.

Joy has spread inside of Akira's chest.

Her soul might have been different, but her memories were the same. The path she tread upon was the same.

Which meant she was Yoshimizu Akira.

It was okay to be Yoshimizu Akira.

That would be the best.

".....yup. I get it, Kyo-chan."

"Call me "captain", dumbass."

"But, I think you really should properly apologize to Kusanagi-kun and the others〜."

"....."

The two advanced forward in the dark corridor.

But their destination was the place filled with moonlight.

* * *

This same, unchanging scenery is boring. That's what Ootori Sougetsu had always thought.

Tranquillity, peace, stability, stagnation. He hated all of it.

Overlooking the school and city spread below Sougetsu felt no melancholy, he just stared at the world that hasn't changed even though a war was undergoing.

——Ootori Sougetsu couldn't help but to hate this world from the bottom of his heart.

Mythology, magic, science, witches, humans. Having all those in the world causing chaos made him feel nauseous.

The odor of magic that had infested this world making him crazy, was something he hated tremendously.

"....."

Ahh, I want this world to perish as soon as possible.

I want to return this world to how it should be.

The only thing he longed for was destruction. He believed that the "nothingness" ahead was something that would fulfill his existence, he couldn't help but to believe in it.

"What a boring scenery."

It wasn't Sougetsu who said that. It was the foreign mass in the back, behind him.

It had come up beside Sougetsu and beside him, it stared at the city below.

"So, what is an interesting scenery for you?"

Sougetsu looked at it and asked.

"...a world with nothing in it. A world with no one in it but Onii-chan."

"Hahaha, you really do love your Onii-chan. But you aren't familiar with the outside world, right? There might be someone more wonderful than your Onii-chan is, there might be something more fun than loving each other with your Onii-chan, you know?"

Sougetsu's white hair swayed and he stared at it.

A girl clad in a dress made from red meat. Hyakki Yakou, Kusanagi Kiseki looked beyond the glass wall with cold pupils. With an expression showing no emotions, she just narrowed her cold eyes.

"Not interested. If Kiseki is to be stained by the outside world, Kiseki would rather just be together with Onii-chan. No need for anything else."

"...as long as you have Onii-chan's love, you need nothing else?"

When Sougetsu asked that with a grin, Kiseki slowly moved her gaze to him and opened her eyes wide. The wide-open eyes showed pupils that looked like a bottomless swamp in the darkness as they stared at Sougetsu.

"——Onii-chan's love? I have no need for such a thing?"

Tilting her head, Kiseki said so without any hesitation.

Her appearance didn't look like that of a human at all. The foreign existence inside of her seemed to have assimilated her into itself.

Sougetsu could already affirm that she wasn't a human any more. Kusanagi Kiseki's soul and body that were alien to each other until now matched each other to a surprising degree. Since human beings of Kusanagi family had a demon's curse mixed in their blood, men were born with a demon souls and the women were born with the demon bodies. Therefore the men had rough temper, they felt their soul was too large for a human's body that was its vessel. Women felt their body is too broad since their human soul was inside of a demon's body that was its vessel. While in men's case they succeeded in maintaining their sanity thanks to strict training, it wasn't so in case of women. Hyakki Yakou's body continued to fulfill the desires single-mindedly and could not be controlled with a human soul.

However, this girl had managed to do it.

It was a result that had far exceeded Sougetsu's imagination. It was satisfactory if she was to go berserk, but for a human's soul to control Hyakki Yakou... the mental strength of human Kusanagi women was immeasurable.

Or rather than Kusanagi women, maybe it was Kusanagi Kiseki that was extraordinary.

Sougetsu made a joyful smile and stared at the scenery behind the glass again.

"As I thought, you do have the qualities to destroy this world. Your body, your soul is completely beyond salvation."

"....."

"But you see."

Sougetsu stood up and raised Kiseki's chin with a finger, making a distorted smile like that of a cat.

"You won't destroy this world. You won't do. You aren't the one who will destroy the world."

"....."

"The one who will destroy it——is your *Onii-chan*. Remember this well. If you do, surely you will obtain what you desire. The finest death there is, a sweet demise will invite you."

Kiseki nodded promptly.

"I know. There are things even Kiseki can't kill, right?"

"Exactly."

Sougetsu stroked Kiseki's cheek and just a little sadly his expression softened as he smiled.

She displayed no emotions, just stared at Sougetsu with abyss-like pupils.

"Why is your goal the same as Kiseki's?"

Sougetsu withdrew his hand and sat down in the chair once again.

"...Wrong. It's not the same."

And squinting, he rest his back on the seat.

"For me, there's nothing but destruction."

His eyes staring in the distance looked as if he strongly yearned for something.

"Without a doubt, the enemy will attack soon. I can tell. I can smell war. This city will become a battlefield."

"....."

"When that happens, it's your turn."

The war was near.

The eyes all over the girl's dress trembled in delight.

Sougetsu turned his back on the aggregation of demons and took a deep breath.

"...now then, before the battle begins there's something remaining that has to be cleaned up."

Looking at the city with anticipation, he searched for a Relic Eater's reaction.

All the Relic Eaters were under Ootori Sougetsu's control. No matter where they attempt to hide, he could immediately find their contractors.

"As expected, you stepped in too deep, Kurogane-kun."

Rather than the usual carefree smile of his, Sougetsu's expression has turned into a serious one.

* * *

Two days later, the 35th platoon that had finished their preparations in the platoon's room, gathered near a transfer device on the ground that would take them to the Critical Point in the Grey City.

While the Reginns and sorcerers prepared the equipment, Takeru felt a presence behind them.

"Kusanagi."

When he turned around, he saw Kyouya stand there in full equipment.

Mari and Usagi didn't seem to have a good impression of him and they have turned wary the moment they saw him.

While Takeru couldn't forgive him either, but since he knew Kouya's nature he wasn't really bothered by him.

"What is it?"

Probably irritated by Takeru's normal reaction, Kyouya made a genuinely grumpy expression.

"...come here for a sec.'

With a stern look on his face he said something out of character. Usagi moved in front as if to protect Takeru.

"What do you need Kusanagi for? If you need something, you can just say it here, can you not?"

I won't let you lay a hand on Kusanagi, as if to say that Usagi had stretched her back.

Kyouya was slightly taken aback by Usagi's unexpected behavior.

It was no wonder, if it was the timid and fearful Usagi from before she wouldn't have come out in front.

Takeru put a hand on her shoulder.

"Usagi, it's all right."

"B-but..."

"We're just going to talk."

Pulling on Usagi's shoulder, Takeru moved in front.

He followed Kyouya who had turned around on his heel without saying anything.

After moving away from his comrades and going behind the school building Takeru saw Kyouya stop moving and turn around. Takeru too, stopped moving and faced him.

"Speaking of which... Kyouya, it seems like you helped my comrades during the border's defense."

"...I didn't help them. I was just ordered to monitor 35th platoon."

"Hmph. I don't care if that's how it was. Let me say thank you for that. Thanks."

When Takeru told his thanks, Kyouya clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Don't screw with me bastard... what's that supposed to be? Thanks? I deserve nothing of it do I. In the first place, you bastard——"

"So, what's the talk about? There's no time so hurry up."

"〜〜〜〜Ghh!!"

Takeru knew that Kyouya was irritated.

He did that deliberately. Having helped Ouka and the others was something that was unrelated to their own quarrel, which was why he honestly wanted to thank him.

Kyouya suppressed his anger and went down to the main topic.

"You're going to investigate Chairman's identity, ain't you. Take me with you."

While saying that bluntly, Kyouya glared at Takeru.

Takeru responded, "why?", but with his gaze instead of words.

"I've no intention of apologizing to you. What I did to your little sister is something I wanted to do. I ain't thinking I was wrong even now."

These were his true feelings. They have already reached him when they clashed in battle.

It changed nothing even if he said that now.

No matter what Takeru says, this man won't apologize.

He absolutely won't wield. That's the guy he is.

"However, you saved Akira. I didn't ask you to do that, but you did something I couldn't do. I intend to pay you back for that."

"....."

"I won't hold you back. I've no intention of joining your platoon, but I'll listen to your orders. Take me with you."

Seeing a straightforward look in Kyouya's eyes, Takeru sighed lightly.

That must've been Kyouya's way to settle things.

"I don't mind, rather, it's a great help. But I have one condition."

Although Kyouya looked questioningly at him when he heard "condition", it seemed like he had guessed what was it from Takeru's expression, who had furrowed his eyebrows.

Takeru clenched his fist and said.

"Let me punch you."

There was no killing intent nor meaning in it, but Takeru directed pure anger towards Kyouya. After being told that Kyouya prepared himself, he folded his arms in front of his chest and snorted.

It was as if he was saying it's hundred times better than apologizing.

"Do your wor——"

Before he could finish, Takeru's fist bit into his cheek.

It was a quite hefty straight right from a run up.

With a dull sound Kyouya was blown away, he slid on the ground and his head slammed into the school building's wall.

Takeru let out a deep breath and walked up to where Kyouya was blown away.

And he looked at Kyouya who was staring at the sky above, lying on his back.

"You alive?"

"...as if I'd die from just this moron."

When Kyouya laughed with a swollen cheek that seemed like it would make it hard to speak, Takeru stretched out his hand to him.

Sitting down, Kyouya stared at that hand.

"I've no intention of striking a bargain like this, don't worry. That's what you want, right?"

As Kyouya's circumstances deepened, they have clashed multiple times. In the middle school age too, their relations were decent. There wasn't enough time to call it friendship, their relation was savage but Takeru knew right from the start what kind of a guy was he.

It was the same for Kyouya.

Kyouya snorted and made a light smile.

"Fine by me——you dork."

Takeru's outstretched hand was roughly grasped by Kyouya.

And thus, Kirigaya Kyouya had started to cooperate with Takeru and others, as a member of Heretic Alliance.

Takeru didn't hear anything about Nero.

But since Kyouya said "don't worry", there was no choice but to believe him.

When they returned to where everyone was, seeing Kyouya's swollen face Ikaruga said "that's youth for you" with a grin, which in turn made Kyouya sulk. Ignoring that, Takeru realized that the 35th platoon was going in a good direction when it came to military force.

However, he still had no way of knowing that what lied ahead of them was a battle fierce beyond his imagination.

Chapter 3 - Red Glare

After shaking off Inquisitors pursuing him, Hayato reached his destination on foot.

The location was an underpass near the border. The tunnels under the border were dug in a rush during the war and turned into a wide labyrinth, not even Inquisition had grasped it fully.

It was a perfect escape route and a hiding place for criminals.

Hayato has memorized its map. The location he was in was used for transportation of goods using trolleys during the war. The closed space and moisture felt in the air would normally wear away anyone. It was unthinkable anyone would set a foot here.

Not bothered, Hayato proceeded while brushing away spider nests.

After walking on the old rails for about an hour he finally found it.

It could be called a small station, there was a small space next to the rails. It was the underpass the witches' army had arbitrarily used. Surely, it must have been used as a waiting space. Fifteen years ago a witches troop used magic of Earth property and have managed to launch a surprise attack from under the ground at speed unthinkable to happen with the current mining technology.

Since it was something last used fifteen years ago it had aged severely, but given the years it was still firm and wasn't near collapsing.

Hayato stood on a small platform and opened iron door in the back.

With flash light in one hand he looked around the room. Rather than station's staff room, it was a goods depot. The documents and magical circles drawn by hand required for instant charms generation have remained intact.

While there was evidence of being ravaged, but there was lots of things left intact like a purchased magic teaching certificate and such.

Hayato looked around the room once and had lit up the floor under a bookshelf.

On the floor with dust piled up on it there was a faint sign of something being dragged.

He put a hand on the bookshelf and casually he pulled it to the left side. The bookshelf on the wall was a classic hidden door.

"....."

After using a keypick Hayato intruded inside in about three seconds.

Without even a scowl from feeling the moist and dusty air he checked the hidden room.

There was a table and a number of documents on a small bookshelf.

On top of the table there was a single letter and a lantern, as well as something which looked like liquor bottle.

Something like a pale blue liquid was placed in the bottle.

Hayato picked up the letter and read it under the light.

In there, was the will written down by his former boss.

——Kurogane, head to Critical Point. I hid the truth about Ootori Sougetsu in there. However, resolve yourself if you wish to know it.

In the end, I who have a family don't have the resolve required to challenge that man.

The liquid filling the vial is used to release a Relic Eater from Ootori Sougetsu's supervision. It's a substance from another world. Use it as you please.

If you are prepared to turn the entire world into your enemies to enforce your law, head forward.

Mineshiro Kazuma.

After reading the entire letter written in short sentences, Hayato,

"...Hmph."

Snorted mockingly, appalled.

"You act quite self-importantly despite not enforcing your beliefs..."

Muttering so, he turned over to the second page of the letter.

On the second page was something like a short postscript.

I really hated you.

That's why you're the only one of my co-workers I involve in this.

Hayato made a distorted smile.

While it was distorted, in his squinting expression there was something like nostalgia.

——The human called Kurogane Hayato was born broken. At the same time he had a sort of talent. However, for his broken spirit this talent was too great.

Even now, Hayato thought that his past self was not qualified to hold that power.

The one who gave him the qualification, was Ouka's foster father, Mineshiro Kazuma.

* * *

It was a story from about ten years before, when Kurogane Hayato had become an Inquisitor.

The top student who had graduated from AntiMagic Academy and the youngest "Dullahan" at the time... that was Hayato.

Hayato was enlisted in the Zeroth Extermination Riot Police "EXE" and met its captain, Mineshiro Kazuma.

『"I wonder why... you smell to me like a shitty bastard."』

That was the first thing Mineshiro Kazuma said after meeting Hayato.

Kazuma disliked Hayato right from the start. He acted in that manner to everyone, but it could be said that it was more intense towards Hayato.

Shitty bastard.

Being told that, Hayato didn't show neither a positive nor negative reaction and saluting, he kept his calm.

After living a life of being abused, it was something he was told by a lot of people so it didn't inspire any feelings of anger or frustration in him.

That he doesn't have many emotions, that he shouldn't have been born, it wasn't that. Just simply, their feelings could be summarized as if he was a "hindrance" to them just by living, he understood that well.

It was like that since his childhood.

He only thought of efficiency in everything, considered what was needed and acted upon it.

Always having an extraordinary situation judgment ability and an outstanding instinct allowing him to avoid risk.

The most noteworthy thing was his physical ability that was hard to believe to be that of a human. Even though the person himself didn't try as hard, his athletic abilities were much higher than

those of a human's. He didn't train his body nor had any knowledge. And yet when it came to moving his body he could demonstrate outstanding skills.

In short, he was able to do anything without putting any effort.

Because of that he was despised as a psychopath or a robot. To top it off he creeped out his parents and was forced to live alone from an early age.

Even so, that didn't make Hayato sad in the least.

To him, it was a good thing since it was more efficient to live alone.

Since he had a talent, he took advantage of it to the fullest. He wanted to try how far would it take him. If there was the bottom of it, he wanted to reach it.

Thinking so, Hayato frequented the library and accumulated knowledge.

In the process, he learned how were humans like him called.

The legendary existences in history called "Heroes" had all without exception abnormal bodily and intellectual specs. Despite not possessing any magical power, an existence surpassing others in every field. That was a hero.

Aberrant individuals like that seemed to have been called "Hero Vessels".

I see, I'm probably that. Hayato thought without feeling anything special.

And then he thought of what would be the environment and circumstances for him to live to the fullest.

After picking out things that interested him, he ended up with two.

To involve himself with evil and rule over this world.

To become a guardian of the law and protect this world.

Hayato didn't mind doing either, he was interested in both of them.

Once he decided on one he just had to carry through with it.

Honestly perform the role.

That's what he decided.

And Hayato made his choice——by flipping a coin.

『"Caligula's contractors are never guys any decent. They all have a problem with their mentality. Will you be no exception?"』

After becoming a Dullahan and contracting with the Relic Eater "Caligula" on the first day he was told that by Kazuma, to which Hayato responded with.

『"Ever since I was born I have adhered to the law."』

Kazuma looked at Hayato with darkness in his eyes, wanting to hit him from the bottom of his heart as blood vessels appeared on his temple.

Since then, Kazuma and Hayato clashed many times.

It seemed like Hayato's straightforward personality that focused on key points was apparently irritating Kazuma. He didn't move as ordered because he gave priority to efficiency, questioned Kazuma's captain's orders, he was an extraordinarily cheeky rookie beyond help.

Hayato was rash and brilliant, he has had many achievements immediately after being enlisted but he often went against instructions. From Hayato's perspective, he thought that Kazuma was inferior to him and a hindrance he regarded as a failure.

His excellence could be seen through the number of arrests, but the cases Hayato had undertaken ended up having many victims among civilians. While Kazuma had no mercy for the enemy and was given a nickname of "Red Glare", he strove to minimize damage among the civilians.

The two similar yet conflicting people clashed desperately.

Although EXE members often moved independently, Kazuma appointed Hayato to act as his support. Hayato didn't understand his true intentions, but he thought that Kazuma as the captain intended to crush Hayato's inquisitor self.

In the end, Hayato didn't change. He just straightforwardly continued to protect the law, not having any consideration or sympathy to the victims from general public.

Half a year had elapsed since the two started working together.

The arrest target seemed to have had a phantom instrument emerge, basically it was a girl who had become a witch. Her phantom instrument was cracked and she released magical power outside as a result of having Overflow Complex.

The one who had arrived on the scene first was Hayato.

In the hotel's front lobby there were countless civilian corpses lying around. In the center of it, there was a female high school student crying, unable to restrain her magical power.

Hayato told her what are her rights and that he is going capture her.

Triggered by fear, more magical power overflowed from the frightened girl who was unable to anything.

Hayato shot the girl without hesitation.

He didn't kill her. Hayato determined that at this level there was no need to kill her.

With his gun he shot through all of her four limbs, the girl, crying from pain had lost her consciousness.

And when Hayato was handcuffing the girl, Kazuma who had come late punched him and sent him flying. Hayato didn't know why was he hit nor he had any interest in knowing.

Kazuma looked like anger incarnate as he grasped Hayato's chest and lifted him up.

『"What is anti-magic to you?"』

『"In what meaning?"』

『"What is ours, Inquisitors objective."』

『"Capturing criminals who use magic. Seizing Magical Heritages. Catching witches and sorcerers who have magical power in their bodies and are a threat to the general public."』

『"Then I'll ask, is that girl a criminal?"』

『"No. It's an ex-civilian who had become a witch just now."』

『"Then why did you shoot?! You shot a civilian with your gun!"』

As the angry voice resounded, Kurogane tilted his head.

『"Self-defense. If she was left as is she would cause a magical disaster and increase the amount of victims. I have also given priority to my own life and have firmly taken action."』

『"With your strength it should have been easy for you to arrest her! Where do you see a need to shoot her limbs! That girl is a victim!"』

『"A victim... that is wrong. That girl is the arrest target. Not a victim. Shooting her limbs saves us time."』

『"……!!"』

『"It can be also found among the law regarding our duties. Article 7, if the target is a witch or a sorcerer, if the target is considered dangerous Inquisitor is allowed to fire regardless of whether the target has any intent to kill."』

『"……."』

『"I adhere to the law."』

Indifferently saying that, Hayato attempted to shake off Kazuma's hand.

He thought it was getting tiresome.

However, still grasping Hayato's chest and raising him up, Kazuma moved his face right in front of Hayato's.

『"Those who don't have law in their heart aren't qualified to be Inquisitors...!!"』

Then just like that Kazuma let go of Hayato, pushing him forward and called Seelie reinforcements.

At the same time as he was released, Hayato fixed his roughened collar and returned to his duties while maintaining his calm.

However, Kazuma's words have mysteriously remained in his head.

Kazuma's back, who has turned around on his heel had engraved itself in Hayato's mind.

A year after that, there was an incident.

Something has happened during the investigation of a professional witch trafficking organization "Red Butterfly's Insect Cage" they had been pursuing for many years.

Kazuma and Hayato requested Banshees to go infiltrate while undercover and put an effort towards resolving the case.

In the course of the investigation some suspicions have surfaced.

There was a possibility of Inquisition and Insect Cage having a collusion.

Rather than aim at destroying of Insect Cage, Hayato insisted on following the trail leading to Inquisition, but Kazuma has decided to continue normal investigation.

『"Why?"』

『"What we should prioritize now are the trapped, innocent witches. If it's known that we're looking into the trail leading to Inquisition, the information will be relayed to Insect Cage and the witches will be killed to conceal everything."』

『"I think it's obvious which one should be given a higher priority."』

『"I didn't ask you for opinion."』

Hayato knew well just how stubborn Kazuma was since he was his subordinate for three years already. Rather than go against him, Hayato who listened to orders and always thought of best solutions didn't say anything else.

A week later.

Information was leaked somewhere and before EXE could rush in all the captured witches have been disposed of. After getting rid of the remaining members of Insect Cage who purchased the stock, Hayato found Kazuma's figure kneel in front of one of the corpses.

『"……Captain?"』

Seeing Kazuma hunch over and tremble, Hayato was slightly surprised.

Beside him lied a girl's body. Used as a tool in order to birth humans with magical power, she was one of the witches used as a commodity.

It was the person who had cooperated with EXE during the investigation.

A fragile girl with a striking sunset-colored hair.

『"……"』

Without saying anything Kazuma crouched in front of the girl.

His back looked so small, Hayato laughed through is nose.

『"I've told you. If this was to happen, we should have changed the investigation policy."』

『"……"』

『"Instead, everything was in vain. The situation is worse than expected. The executives have escaped, all witches were killed. Since products would have been disposed off anyway, we should have gotten any information possible on collusion."』

It's your fault.

It was because of your immature, irrational decision——

『"It wasn't in vain."』

Kazuma stood up and said so.

He turned around and slowly walked towards the exit.

On his chest there was a baby that was born not long ago. Judging from the little of growing hair's color, it was the child of the dead girl.

Smiling sadly, Kazuma passed by Hayato's side while holding the baby.

『"This is the law I believe in, the way of an Inquisitor I believe in. Kurogane."』

When they passed by each other, that's what Kazuma said.

Hayato turned around and looked at Kazuma's back.

That back of his looked very big. Burdened with various things, hurt, troubled and yet it was a back of a man who lived according to his firm and noble beliefs.

『"Law isn't there just for itself."』

『"....."』

『"Law is there to protect people. I believe so. I think it would be good if a time was to come when you understand it."』

Opening the door, Kazuma left the Insect Cage's hideout. Looking at the strong and big back bathed in the sunlight, for the first time Hayato had become interested in the human called Mineshiro Kazuma.

Or rather, an interest in his beliefs has sprung up.

He thought of making sure.

How far does the law he believes in can go.

Since then, Hayato became more reckless than ever when fulfilling his duties. What changed, is that he didn't go against Kazuma's orders and refrained from independent action, he also cooperated with his comrades. Although the essence of what he did hasn't changed, but by moving accordingly to orders he thought he would be able to understand Mineshiro Kazuma.

He wanted to know the meaning of the words Kazuma said when he was turned with his back to Hayato back then.

Although he was a problem child, Hayato had gradually adapted and was accepted by comrades from EXE.

The line between those who could be saved and those who couldn't was obscured for him, he learned that if he discards efficiency and uses all his strength he can get unexpected results.

By learning that, the number of those he was able to save had naturally increased further and further.

Little by little, he felt he was starting to understand Kazuma who was his aim. A few years after the case of Insect Cage, Hayato had rose up to the position of EXE's vice captain.

However, on the other hand Kazuma often left Hayato in charge of EXE. Other members have speculated that he was probably busy with a different investigation, but Hayato knew that wasn't the case.

That was because he was asked by Ootori Sougetsu to investigate Kazuma.

『"It seems like he's hanging out with a strange bunch. The so-called dissidents. They're dissatisfied with the current situation in Inquisition and are something like terrorists dealing with espionage... he seems to work with a bunch like that."』

『"...so it's still uncertain, isn't it."』

『"Yes, it just 'seems'. That's why I want you investigate him. This is the Chairman's direct order, you cannot refu——"』

『"I humbly accept."』

Hayato decided immediately.

In his mind, he was glad to be the one to receive the request. In the first place no one else other than him was able to find out what Kazuma was hiding and he didn't want anyone else to get in the way of witnessing the fate of Kazuma's law. It was better to go by himself and investigate it.

Since then, Hayato continued to tail Kazuma. If he really did aid the terrorists,

"So that's how far your law goes." is what he would say right in front of him.

He had an idea why did Kazuma joined the dissidents. The collusion of Insect Cage and Inquisition changed his suspicions to confidence and he had turned to the enemy in order to overturn the current system.

If in spite of being guilty of betrayal Kazuma tries to make excuses, Hayato won't hesitate to execute him on spot for a crime of leaving the side of law.

However, Kazuma had suddenly called Hayato to the old base of the Insect Cage and when they finished speaking of old times, he abruptly said.

『"I'm retiring. I think of leaving the EXE to you."』

He had already submitted his resignation to Inquisition and nominated Hayato to be the next captain. With just that, Hayato opened his eyes wide in shock.

『"Why?"』

『"Hmm. I have a wife and children, I think I'm approaching the limit. I'm not young any more. I want to live the rest of my life with my family."』

Even though Kazuma always spoke in a strong tone of voice, just this time he spoke leniently.

Hayato, who normally hadn't displayed any emotions and discarded them as a hindrance for some reason had his vision stained red, he was overflowing with anger.

『"——Stop screwing around. You betrayed Inquisition and intended to join the dissidents haven't you. I've already found you out."』

He didn't notice that he had spoken emotionally.

Hayato felt betrayed. Kazuma continued to preach him about the way of an Inquisitor and the law, Hayato didn't think he was the person who would betray his own way and law.

Back then, what was that prideful back of his Kazuma showed.

Kazuma was slightly dumbfounded, then made a bitter smile.

『"So you are able to make that kind of expression now. You really changed, Kurogane."』

Hayato took out a gun from his pocket and pointed it at Kazuma.

『"Don't change the topic. Answer. Do you intend to betray us?"』

Although Hayato fired the gun to intimidate him, Kazuma answered quietly without any agitation.

『"It's true that I'm a member of the dissidents. However, I'm not quitting Inquisition because of the dissident faction. It's true that I leave for my own family."』

『"....."』

『"I knew that Inquisition has taken notice of my movements. If I continued, I would become a criminal. I can't afford to inconvenience my family."』

『"....."』

『"That's how it is. Shoot, if you want to."』

Kazuma's words made it seem as if he was confident Hayato won't shoot.

That was why Hayato has become increasingly frustrated.

『"What are you hiding... you aren't a man who would throw away your beliefs just like that. There has to be something more decisive. In the first place, didn't you think of telling me about the dissidents?"』

『"I wouldn't do that. While your nasty personality didn't change, you aren't your old self any more."』

Kazuma stared straight at Hayato.

Hayato was furious. His hair almost stood up from anger, the muscle on his cheek convulsed and the his facial expression was distorted.

There wouldn't be a problem if he killed a traitor. He would be able to kill two birds with one stone, he would at the same time eliminate a man who had evidence of Inquisition being connected to Insect Cage.

And yet, he didn't shoot.

Killing him, *would be going against the law that was now inside of Hayato*.

Looking at Hayato who didn't shoot, Kazuma smiled lightly.

『"I leave EXE to you."』

Then, he lightly his Hayato's chest with a fist, turned around on his heel and walked outside.

Hayato lowered his gun and spat out his indecisive feelings.

『"Mineshiro Kazuma! Was your belief only this much?! What about the law inside of you?!"』

Kazuma didn't stop.

『"If your law is to protect people, then prove it to me! I still haven't acknowledged you!"』

And yet, Hayato continued to call out to his back.

『"——!! What about EXE?! Are you leaving us behind...?!"』

His fist trembling, he shouted as if he was spitting blood.

Just for a moment, still turned with his back Kazuma stopped.

『"...if it's the current you, everyone will follow you."』

Kazuma left like that and never came back.

It was the last time Hayato saw Kazuma alive.

『"——He's clean. He had nothing to do with the dissidents."』

For the result of the investigation of Mineshiro Kazuma, he said so.

He wasn't really covering for Kazuma.

Hayato just didn't see a need to chase a person who had left the Inquisition.

After being appointed the captain Hayato continued to steadily amass achievements. Since he served as the school's student council president, he was used to being in command.

He didn't try to imitate Kazuma. Hayato intended to lead the EXE in his own way.

And yet, his comrades trust him very much.

Hayato didn't know if something has changed inside of him.

Five years after he had taken up the duties as the captain, he was suddenly contacted by Kazuma.

A single e-mail had arrived in his mobile phone.

『"If something was to happen to me, I leave my daughters and wife to you."』

That was all the content in the mail.

Kazuma wasn't being himself if he requested such a thing.

There was nothing that could be done with Kazuma and his family. At the moment they were busy with the skirmish against Valhalla, lost some comrades at times, which had pushed EXE into a critical situation.

However, he didn't think in the least that judgment would give birth to such a tragedy.

In the early morning of the next day, Hayato visited Kazuma's home.

A premonition. Foreboding. The word didn't matter. While he was fighting against Valhalla's Haunted, he had a premonition that something was happening behind his back.

Immediately after arriving at the home Hayato noticed an anomaly.

It was too quiet. There was no signs of living.

Hayato pulled out the gun and stood in the entrance, vigilant.

He opened the door.

The moment he entered inside he could smell blood in his nostrils.

There were bloodstains on the floor. Following them, he went to the living room.

He flung the doors open and rushed in holding a handgun.

『"———"』

With eyes wide open, Hayato was at loss for words.

A scene worth being called a tragedy had appeared in front of him.

Two bodies lied in front of the TV as if embracing each other.

A corpse of a young child fallen in the middle of the living room.

And, soaking in the light of morning sun, lying on her knees a stunned girl watching this sight.

Hayato slowly lowered his gun, then got on one knee to check the pulse in the bodies.

Kazuma and his wife were dead.

He stood up and went to the living room's center.

The girl with sunset-colored hair overlooked the child's body.

Her hair was familiar. That hair was the same as that of the girl used by Insect Cage in order to give birth to products. This girl must have been her child.

Hayato heard that Kazuma had adopted a child from his co-workers.

He didn't think it would be the child from back then.

It was very much like Kazuma, it could be said it was so much like him it made Hayato appalled.

He could see at a glance that the child in the center was no longer breathing.

The girl with sunset-colored hair was alive.

She was alive.

That was all.

『"....."』

Hayato holstered the gun and walked up to the girl.

He didn't know what to do, since he was born it was the first time he experienced something like this.

She must have continued to cry all day. She had remainder of tears on her cheek. Dried up lips, eyes of a cloudy color and a broken heart.

What was happened in this place was something he could roughly guess.

Magical circles burned in the room, a bloodied knife, blood splashed all over.

Mineshiro Kazuma, his wife and daughter... were killed by this girl.

The arrangement of the magical circles was for something similar to mental contamination magic.

This girl was manipulated by a witch to kill her family. He could tell judging from the magical circles that the magic didn't take over her consciousness. It only deprived her of ability to move her own body and killed her family while having her retain consciousness intact.

It was an experience too heavy for a young girl to bear.

『"....."』

His head cooled off. Hayato automatically organized information and discarded emotions that got in the way.

Nothing could be done after it had already happened. A retired inquisitor being killed is something that happens often. Much less Kazuma who had cooperated with the dissidents. Prepared for that, he still formed a family.

Whether was it Inquisition that killed him, dissidents or maybe someone who had a grudge on him was something Hayato would definitely investigate.

First, I'll contact headquarters for support, let forensics examine the scene and then——

——Those who don't have law in their heart aren't qualified to be Inquisitors.

『"....."』

Unexpectedly, Kazuma's back has crossed his mind.

His hand that was about to pull out the mobile stopped and Hayato narrowed his eyes.

Hayato walked up to the girl and lifted her up.

He didn't know how to hold children, only imitated it. Just like Kazuma had held her when she was still a baby.

Doing this is for the best, that's what he had judged.

The girl just continued to stare in the air with darkness in her eyes.

Hayato said.

Thinking it is right, his own words.

『"...it's all right now."』

『"....."』

『"It's all right."』

He didn't know any smart words he could say.

However, the words that hardly could be taken as consolation certainly have seemed to reach the girl. A moment after the girl looked up at Hayato with darkness in her eyes, she fainted as if her threads were cut.

The weight on his arms had increased.

He wondered if Mineshiro Kazuma had felt this weight on his arms back then.

No... the weight Kazuma felt, was weight of a life he saved.

The weight Hayato was holding now, was the weight of life he didn't save.

If he rushed here faster, the result might have changed. If it was himself from the past, he would treat Kazuma's life and the girl's spirit as a trivial problem in comparison to chasing the Valhalla.

Right now, he regretted this situation.

The fact, that if he came faster he might have been able to save them.

『"....."』

In the past he thought of feelings like this as of a hindrance. Right now, he thought of regret as of a necessary emotion.

He was unconvinced by the fact that he was convinced of that.

To be precise, the fact that he was influenced by Kazuma hurt him a little bit.

Even now he couldn't acknowledge Kazuma overall. He was a human full of shortcomings. He involved himself with dissidents. Casually adopting this girl, having a family in the first place despite being an inquisitor, all of it wasn't an example to follow. Troubled by many things, being hurt, his stubbornness and conviction that he was right was all annoying.

And yet.

『"...I have learned a lot, Captain."』

He was grateful to Kazuma.

Hayato was grateful for making him notice emotions are by no means a hindrance. For making him notice the law inside of him.

He thought of 'saving everything' as pretentious.

And hadn't personal attachments like Kazuma.

However——he will save lives even if he has to discard efficiency and give his all.

In order not to taste this regret again... that, was the law of Kurogane Hayato.

——In a certain prefecture, in a certain mountain village.

A first-type contamination alert had been announced, all the EXE members have been called in a certain event some time after Mineshiro Kazuma's death.

An unidentified witch or a fantastical creature had appeared and was said to have swallowed an entire village whole.

After looking down at the scene from the helicopter in the sky, Hayato jumped down.

A sea of screaming, red meat. Nestled in the center of it was a white figure.

Although he had no idea what was it, without a doubt it was an immeasurable threat.

Hayato continued rapid fire from Caligula as he dropped and ensured a landing point by blowing away the red meat, then landed in it without a parachute.

Making a hand sign he had the helicopter evacuate and faced the figure.

In the center of the red meat that had eroded the village, she was there.

She looked at Hayato, shedding tears of blood.

『"...kill me..."』

She plead to Hayato.

Please kill me, she said.

Hayato squinted and pulled out two revolvers.

Then, he aimed the muzzles at it.

As if in peace, she made a smile while shedding tears.

『"Kill...Kiseki...I don't care...whatever...whoever...put me to rest. "』

As if she wished to be saved.

To her, death must have been a salvation. In order not to kill any more people, in order not to hate the world any longer, she wished to be killed.

Just these words of hers were enough to relay the entirety of her tragedy.

However, Hayato didn't intend to listen to what she wished for.

From inside of himself, he squeezed out the correct choice.

He asked the law inside of him.

Is she a victim? A perpetrator?

Whether she was to be killed.

Whether she was to be saved.

There was no need to think about it.

Hayato aimed his gun and put a finger on the trigger.

『"I refuse. That would go against my law."』

The one to be killed wasn't the girl, it was *that*.

The red meat that was eating into her.

Worthy of being called evil itself, a crystallization of heresy.

Hayato furrowed his eyebrows and had a magical circle appear under his feet.

Then aiming the silver and black guns, he said.

Desiring with supreme ardor——

* * *

"....."

His equipment was prepared.

After disassembling the guns and coating all their parts, Hayato had holstered "Caligula" and "Maximilian".

Then he spread oil lantern on the floor, As he was leaving the room he had thrown a lighter inside.

With flames climbing up behind him, Hayato walked forward with resounding footsteps.

"He hid it in a troublesome place..."

The place he headed to, was Critical Point in the Grey City.

To recover the documents left there by Mineshiro Kazuma.

Written in the documents was everything about Ootori Sougetsu.

Even if he tried to punish that man, his power and position were in the way. To drag down Ootori Sougetsu from the position of Inquisition Board's chairman, the truth about him was required.

In order to punish Ootori Sougetsu who had decided to use Kusanagi Kiseki as a weapon, despite the fact she was a target that was supposed to be saved, Hayato all alone had thrown himself into the midst of chaos.

Even if he had to oppose the Inquisition, in order to protect the law of an inquisitor that was inside of him, Hayato decided to fight.

Like blue flames, the anger inside of him had burned quietly.

* * *

《"The troop in pursuit was annihilated by Kurogane Hayato... my apologies."》

In response to the news from the newly remade EXE, Sougetsu hit the railing of his chair with fingers and laughed with an appalled expression.

"Well〜, I think it can't be helped with Kurogane Hayato as the opponent. But to be beat so hard by a flesh-and-blood opponent despite having a permission to use Relic Eater, EXE's name will cry, you know?"

《"Everyone has serious injuries but... there's no casualties. The third troop that was on standby is going to continued trailin——"》

"Since all the Riot Police was integrated into EXE drop the troop number calling. Above all, I don't care whether there were casualties or not. With Kurogane-kun as the opponent I think that serves as no excuse."

《"M-my apologies..."》

Seeing the subordinate immediately apologize, Sougetsu got fed up with him.

"As I thought, having many senior inquisitors was a huge blow... continue tailing him and continue to convey what's going on the field."

《"Tail him? He has already noticed our mov——"》

"It's obvious right from the start that you'll be noticed. The two old EXE members are heading there, you can just cling to them until they find Kurogane-kun's location. At the very least they should put up a better fight than you."

《"The two from old EXE... Jougasaki and Himemiya, is it...?"》

"That's right, the two of his subordinates."

Sougetsu sighed deeply and hung up.

Even though Riot Police was integrated into EXE, it would take some time until the chain of command is complete.

On top of that, the personnel's jobs and title changes were also enforced. A large number of senior inquisitors have been integrated into the newborn EXE, in particular the captains have submitted requests for transfer or resignation notifications. It wasn't limited to the inquisitors, but in organizations like this there were factions and groups that were at odds.

It's all trivial now that I have Hyakki Yakou but... it's getting more and more a pain in the ass.

I wish they were as easy to use as they used to be〜, thinking so, Sougetsu searched for Relic Eater's response.

The location of Caligula and Maximilian was——

...? There's no response? Was the link cut?

Furrowing his eyebrows a little, Sougetsu put a hand on his chin and thought.

Mistilteinn removing herself from under my management aside, Vlad and Nero have been in a similar condition for a while now. On top of that, now it's Caligula and Maximilian...

He stood up and whistling merrily, he continued to walk around in the chairman's office.

A Relic Eater that is a part of myself cutting off its link is practically impossible. Even if it's inside of the sanctuary, it cannot escape from being sensed by me. If by any chance they managed to cut off their link from me... that would mean they are in another world or...

He stopped his legs and dropped his line of sight at the floor, paved with red carpet.

They covered Relic Eaters with a substance that doesn't exist in this world, it's impossible without at least that much.

Inside of Sougetsu's head words have come afloat and faded away.

Relic Eaters, Kurogane Hayato, 35th Test Platoon, Heretic Alliance——and Mineshiro Kazuma.

He snapped his fingers soundly and returned back to his chair.

Sitting deep, he narrowed his eyes forming a crescent shape.

"Hmm... there's no proof, but, should I take a little look?"

From the profile, it looked like was having a little fun.

Chapter 4 - Critical Point

Although the checkpoint in the Border was in high alert when the Pureblood Party attacked, it was no longer an important spot now that the war had begun.

With the possibility of enemy appearing anywhere by using transfer magic, rather than the Grey City that was a den of vagrants and criminals, the solidification of defense in the city and facilities was of higher priority.

Even though it wasn't important, there was a considerable number of Spriggans deployed in the defense perimeter.

A single truck had come to the checkpoint in the early morning when there was relatively few people.

One of the Spriggans had rushed to the car and with a clipboard in his hand he hit the window of the driver's seat.

The window opened and a person dressed like a cook had peeked out.

It was disguised Kirigaya Kyouya.

"——Sup! I've come to deliver food rations to frontlines, can I pass through here?"

As the man made a refreshing greeting not suiting his excellent bearing, the Spriggan had looked puzzled at the man and the clipboards in turns.

"There's no ration distribution in the schedule... from the looks, you don't seem to be inquisitors?"

"Aw, as expected of a Spriggan protecting the city! So sharp〜 I sure look up to you guys〜."

He had a clearly cramped up smile, Kyouya took off his cook's hat and smiled cheerfully.

Sweating profusely, he opened one eye to check the Spriggan's expression.

The Spriggan had stared intently at Kyouya before dropping his line of sight at the clipboard again.

"Cut the pointless flattery. What did you come here for, old man."

Old man.

Hearing that, Kyouya had pat his chest in relief.

Shit... why do I have to take this role...!

Currently, Kyouya was being disguised by Mari's magic and pretended to be someone else. The magic refracted light making him look like a different person, his voice too had been disguised to

sound like that of someone else's. Mari who had specialized in attack magic seemed to be bad with disguise magic that was about the third best magic of hers, so they were tremendously anxious whether she could do it.

It seemed like they were able to fool him so far.

"W-well〜, it's a volunteer work. Witches have attacked a while ago right? My shop was in danger too back then... t-thanks to inquisitors working hard my store wasn't broken and I could continue living〜."

"Oh-hohh, I see."

"Exactly so〜. I guess? As a thanks I'm providing free pastries in your defense line, isn't that a chic plan of my store? How is it?"

"I see I see. I get it. By the way, there's something I'd like to ask while at it..."

"W-what is it Nii-chan?"

"Is your bakery in the Grey City?"

Kyouya's smiling expression froze.

".....ah〜umm??"

"The only part of old Japan attacked was the Border. A large scale battle hasn't happened yet. Or maybe you traveled from the abroad in this day and age? There should be a travel ban now, I don't think you would be able to fund overseas travel when you just have a bakery though?"

The Spriggan was looking with a clear suspicion in his eyes. By the way, in this era to travel abroad one had to pass through a large Sanctuary and the aircraft had to maintain a very high altitude, a large amount of money was necessary.

As one of his excuses was crushed, the inquisitor stared at him.

S-shitt, shit shit shitshitshit...! I'm ain't suited for stuff like this, this is something the Small Fry Platoon's bunch should be doing.

Despite how he was, Kyouya was a stupidly honest man. Instead of letting himself being pulled in he should just have said "I'm a volunteering to reward the Spriggans" and be done with.

"A-ahaha〜, I-I'm not really studious〜 I misspoke you see. My store wasn't destroyed, but collapsed is what I meant to say. L-look, if enemy came attacking like that and people were evacuated no customers would come in〜."

Although his tone of voice wasn't stable, he somehow tried to deceive the Spriggan.

"For now, show me your cargo."

"Eh... i-it's just pastries you know?"

"Making a further mess of this is pointless isn't it, open up."

When the Spriggan went up the loading space, Kyouya got off the driver's seat with a pale face.

"...give me a break."

Takeru had trouble breathing and a difficult enduring as he could feel a bulge squeeze his face.

The place he was in at the moment was a wooden box placed in the back of the vehicle.

Since the headquarters of Heretic Alliance were in another world, it was necessary to use transfer magic to return to their original world. However, the landing point equipment installed by Heretic Alliance in the Grey City and Border was removed by Inquisition, forcing them to sneak in disguise of a distribution vehicle.

Nagaru intended to have one of the disguise magic specialists do it, but Mari said "there's no need to" and has taken the role with self-confidence. While Nagaru had trust Mari, the magic specialist (self-proclaimed), but Takeru and the others were full of anxiety.

That Kyouya, is he doing it properly... s-still, i-it's too narrow here.

Takeru wasn't the only one who was jammed into a wooden box with paper-based buffer material and pastries.

The entire 35th platoon was in it.

To go into more details, Takeru was in the center, Usagi and Mari in front of him, Ikaruga and Ouka behind.

"S-Suginamii, please do not move it is too narrow here——hyann!"

Because Ikaruga had moved, Usagi's chest had pressed even stronger against Takeru's face. Usagi let out a charming voice and twisted her body.

"Kusanagii-iii, your breath tickl...hyahn! P-please stop breathinggg."

"Pwahh, I'll die though?!"

As expected, in this state he'll end up suffocating, he changed his posture and moved his face towards Mari who was in the front left of him. But at the same time, Ikaruga twisted her body and pushed his back, he ended up plunging forward.

"Ow...ww...! Suginami, don't movee, I my face hit the wal...l?"

When he looked forward, it wasn't the wall but Mari who was as close to the wall as possible.

Takeru fearfully raised his gaze up and saw Mari with tears in her eyes, who had tasted shame and made a disgruntled expression. The moment he tried to apologize, although it was unknown what was she thinking, Mari had grabbed Takeru's head with both hands and pressed it against her own chest.

And she had begun to strongly grind his head into it.

"?!?! Ww-whh-what are you doin...stopp..."

"It ain't a walll, I have 'em, I properly have 'em, look, touch yourself and make sure...! I've 'em right, Takeruu."

His face was pressed against Mari's soft chest, rubbing it.

They were there. Certainly, there was a hard to express pleasant sensation there.

It was a great thing by itself. He didn't have a problem breathing either. However, it wasn't time to say that now.

Takeru somehow slipped away from Mari's constraint and leaned backwards.

This time the back of his head was sandwiched between Ikaruga's and Ouka's breasts.

"I wonder if there was a better way to do this... in the first place, why do all four of us have to be squeezed into one wooden box?"

Spitting a sigh, Ikaruga hugged Takeru's head against her chest as if she was embracing a plushie.

"Heyy, don't hug mee, don't cuddle my headd!"

"Kusanagi, it feels... as if you had grown accustomed to this, how boring."

Honestly, he was accustomed to it.

"? Ootori sure is quiet. Normally she would be saying 'keep it down' and such, being the loudest one."

Ouka's face wasn't visible as it was obscured by buffer material.

When Ikaruga tried to move the material away,

"You gyuys, I told tyo be syailent."

She had something in her mouth and was chewing it. Even though she tried to hide it, it didn't really work since she had red bean paste stuck on her cheek.

"...why are you eating anpan now?"

"N-nyot eatying anyathing."

"Don't force yourself."

"...**ng-gulp**, i-it's fine isn't it. It's a waste to use it just for infiltration. Also, we can't enter battle hungry..."

Ouka pouted for a moment facing sideways, then, **nom**, she bit onto the anpan she was holding in her hands.

"....."

This one too has completely become the Small Fry Platoon's member... thought Takeru earnestly.

Even though they were going to a quite dangerous place, why was this platoon acting as usual...

Everyone was accustomed to carnage and was at ease, it seemed like they were missing the sense of tension.

As the captain in here, I should act strictly for the first time after a while...

Takeru didn't really try to act strict before, but he had braced himself to scold everyone.

That's when, the cargo's curtain was opened.

He prompted everyone to stop breathing by putting a finger against his mouth.

"...I think I heard something just now... what's inside there?"

"I-I I said there're pastries in there〜"

Looking from the hole in the wooden box he could see Kyouya looking like an old man and an Inquisitor wearing armor.

From the look on Kyouya's pale face, he was clearly heavily upset.

So it was no good...

The inquisitor went on the cargo without saying anything. Then without saying anything, he opened the wooden box.

Fortunately, it was the box next to theirs.

"...it's pastries."

"I-I told you right〜?"

Relieved, Takeru pat his chest and sighed deeply.

"Sorry, but I'll have to open them all."

Whatt?!

Takeru had raised his pale face and Ouka behind him pulled out a gun.

At the same time the lid was opened, she turned the muzzle towards the inquisitor.

"....."

" " " " "....." " " " "

In silence, the inquisitor and Takeru's group stared at each other.

About five seconds have passed staring.

"...it's pastries"

As if he didn't see anything, the inquisitor closed the lid. Soundlessly, Ouka beside Takeru had sighed deeply.

"...good grief, don't scare me like that..."

Saying so in quiet voice, Ouka lowered her gun.

"The disguise magic somehow made it in time... still, this guy is useless isn't he."

It seemed like before the box was opened, Mari had cast a disguise magic on the box itself. Most likely the content of the box was made it look like it contained nothing but pastries by using light refraction.

The inquisitor had checked all the boxes and clearly calmed down, then filled the clipboard.

"Next time report it properly to headquarters before coming. Got it?"

"Y-yes sir, sorry 'bout this〜."

"Also, one more thing."

Kyouya's shoulders twitched as he tried to make gesture similar to a salute.

The inquisitor had hit the clipboard with the pen's point and pointed at the cargo.

"Are your pastries tasty?"

"He? Ah, yess yes yes!! O-of course it's exquisite!"

"Then divide some among our stations. Pastries are really nice. We're always lacking sugars."

Hearing the inquisitor ask him with a small smile, Kyouya was once again relieved.

Although it was quite forceful, they have managed to safely pass through the Border.

Kyouya returned to the driver's seat and started the car.

The Grey City wasn't that broad, but it was still of the city size.

Their objective was a place dyed even darker by the previous war than the Grey City was, the Critical Point.

From here ahead it's the danger zone, huh... there isn't many Inquisition's patrols, but the danger of being found is still haunting.

Takeru thought about the future while in the wooden box.

They learned in the school's classes on how dangerous the Critical Point is. The location in which depending on the time and weather, phases of the moon and such the Akashic Hazard's range varied was called Critical Point.

In other words, there was a chance they would lose their lives without being able to do anything in the Critical Point. Fortunately, Lapis' and Vlad's functionality was able to confirm the presence or absence of Akashic Hazard. Also, Mari's Aurora magical property allowed them to withstand the Akashic Hazard for several seconds.

Just as "Invisible Disaster" name suggested, it was invisible.

Instead, random phenomenons occur in the location the hazard is currently in. The gravity suddenly changes, trees rapidly grow and die within the span of one day, as well as other singular phenomenons.

Although the inquisitors are wary of how dangerous the Critical Point is and won't approach it, they needed to be more focused than usual.

* * *

AntiMagic Academy's Chairman's office. A call from the newborn EXE tailing Hayato had come to Sougetsu who was drinking afternoon tea.

《"We're currently searching for Kurogane Hayato. We have lost him again after he entered the Border but... there was one strange report."》

"Say it."

《"A suspicious vehicle had entered the Grey City from the Border, then it left the checkpoint. Something about a bakery distributing pastries..."》

Sougetsu responded with "hmm" and placed the cup with tea on the table.

《"The lookout let them pass barely asking any questions, what should we do?"》

"Has Kurogane-kun entered the border?"

The calling inquisitor had responded with confirmation.

"Then, while continuing to search for Kurogane-kun pursue the vehicle as well. You might catch something unexpected."

《"Understood. Should we interrogate them after catching?"》

"No, tail them, it's fine if you just chase after them. Let them swim for now."

Sougetsu finished the call and heaved a sigh.

"...a baker, really... at time like this?"

That's clearly suspicious, isn't it.

Thinking so, Sougetsu chuckled.

* * *

About an hour after they entered the Grey City, the car has suddenly stopped. Having more than enough of staying in the box, Takeru had pushed up the lid and looked outside.

When he did, Kyouya opened the curtain in the back.

"We've arrived. From here on it's the Critical Point. There's no inquisition's patrols either... it won't be strange if you die any time here, so be careful."

Kyouya went up on the cargo and from the bottom of one of the boxes he took out Nero, which he placed on his shoulder.

Takeru and his comrades got out from the wooden boxes and looked at Kyouya as he stretched. As Kyouya continued to be wary of the surroundings, everyone including Takeru stared at him.

"...ha? What yer' lookin' at."

" " " " "....." " " " "

"What's with you bastards staring like that... if you've got anythin' to say then say it...!"

As Kyouya had intimidated them, Takeru instinctively turned away.

He had no idea what kind of expression should he make.

Even though Kyouya intimidated them, to Takeru he looked like an old man from a bakery.

As Kyouya looked out of touch elsewhere, the 35th platoon's members looked away all at once and started to whisper among each other.

"...is that really fine with Kyouya?"

"Bffufu... he hasn't noticed yet. We're already in the Critical Point so he can just cancel the disguise magic."

"D-don't laugh at the poor guy... rather, it's Nikaido who put the magic on him, so she should just release it."

"But if I am not in the wrong, Nikaido only gave him an instant charm. If the charm isn't torn off, the effect won't disappear..."

"It's interesting so let's leave it as is. The sight of an old man striking a pose with a Relic Eater in his hands is surreal. I should have brought a camera... surely, Yoshimizu would be happy with a picture."

The three who weren't sure whether they should laugh or not and Mari with Ikaruga who desperately held in their laughter.

Seeing the bunch like that, Kyouya thought they are being strange and looked at his own reflection in the truck's glass window.

"———!"

Rather than surprised, he was speechless.

When Kyouya got off the car, he took out the charm from his pocket and torn it to pieces. After returning to his original appearance, without looking in their direction he responded, bearing the anger.

"H-h-hurry up and get off the damn car...!"

He had walked under the guise of calm, but it was already too late. Kyouya had already prepared himself to get a "baker" nickname.

In moderate peace Takeru and others have gotten off the car.

On the road ahead partitioned by yellow tape spread the Critical Point.

The Grey City was eerie, but the Critical Point far surpassed that. Even though it was daytime and the sky was cloudless, it somehow seemed slightly dim.

The place in which they would lose their lives the moment they take a wrong step was right in front of them.

".....let's go."

Takeru and others passed through the yellow tape, setting their feet in the Critical Point.

In case of entering the Critical Point, special goggles or contact lenses called Analysis Filter had to be put on the eyes. The filter detected magical power, allowing invisible magical power to be visualized.

In the Sanctuary there are places where atrocious magical power doesn't disappear. Akashic Hazard deprives life of the organisms just by touching them and can be visually recognized after being passed through the filter.

Also, one more thing was necessary, a special clock informing of the Sanctuary's tides. Since movement of the Akashic Hazard inside of the Critical Point is constant, if they mistake the time they will end up being swallowed by it.

"There's an hour left until this place will be swallowed up in the Sanctuary. We still have time, but it's better to hurry."

Mari said so and had begun to move quickly in the front.

It seemed like she had been in the Critical Point twice in the past and was accustomed to it to some extent. Since she got lost in the underpass it couldn't be trusted too much, but this time she was confident. She has survived being inside twice in the past, so it was natural.

There wasn't a single soul in the Critical Point. Because it was completely abandoned since war, the buildings were old. Posters and propaganda from during the war, old Japanese flags and wreckage of old fashioned cars were left intact.

The buildings aged more severely than those in the Grey City and there were many that collapsed.

Since plants weren't affected by the Sanctuary, elsewhere there were eroded trees.

The 35th platoon proceeded through the asphalt, raised up by the growing trees.

The Critical Point wasn't broad. After walking for 10 minutes they arrived at the destination.

"...it's here. A newspaper company...?"

All that could be recognized from the sooty sigh was that it was some kind of a publisher. Since there was a national flag raised, it probably was from before Inquisition had come to old Japan to intervene, about the time when the control over the newspaper was being enforced. They were taught in history classes that before the war, Inquisition was very weak in Japan.

"Let's hurry. Kyouya, keep watch at the entrance. If something happens contact us via radio."

"...got it. Be careful as not to drop dead in there."

Bluntly showing his concern, Kyouya stood on guard in the entrance, poising Nero.

Carefully treading Takeru and the others set their feet in the building.

The inside was full of dust and there was no evidence of people being in there.

The high stacks of yellowed printing paper were the same as at the time when they were printed. The evidence of devastation was left intact.

Until they reached this place, they haven't seen even a single human bone. Humans caught up in the Akashic Hazard all vanish without a trace.

In a place like this without any signs of people for many years, there was an illusion as if the time had stopped.

It felt as if staying in there for long would cause their spirit to become unstable.

Naturally everyone had become silent and they had just continued to look for the document left behind by Mineshiro Kazuma. Although there were many newspapers, they couldn't see what could be the document.

Takeru and the others had examined everything from first up to the fifth floor.

"...there's nothing here. Sixth floor is the only one left."

After finishing the search of the fifth floor, they headed to the sixth.

"S-still, it's great that we reached here without anything happening..."

After getting to the sixth floor, Usagi broke the silence.

In tune with Usagi who had read the mood, Ouka softened her expression.

"That's true, wherever we go it always turns troublesome."

"It's a dangerous place, but we were safe up until now. There's no enemies nor pursuers. Let's go on at ease〜."

Hearing Mari's carefree words, Takeru smiled wryly.

The two were probably concerned about comrades.

"Everyone, don't relax too much. Let's hurry up and find the document then leave this pla——"

After reaching the end of the stairs, without saying anything Takeru had opened the middle room on the sixth floor and took a few steps in.

——In the middle of the office stood Kurogane Hayato.

"....."

"....."

Hayato stared at Takeru as usual, overflowing with intimidation.

In his left hand, he had something like a black notebook. In his right hand he held a gun and was already pointing it at them.

They were careless, Takeru was completely defenseless and didn't even have a hand on his sword.

His comrades who have come to the sixth floor one by another were stunned, seeing Hayato from behind Takeru.

They had no idea how to act.

Why was EXE's captain, Kurogane Hayato here?

What was he doing in a place like this?

When he thought so——he remembered that their current standing was that of enemies.

"——!!"

Takeru dropped his waist low and when he stretched his hand to the sword,

——Hayato was already in front of him, moving with speed impossible to follow.

With just one step, he already arrived in front of Takeru.

F-fast——

He was approached before he could use Soumatou.

As Takeru was astonished for being sealed before he could make a move, Hayato grasped his head with one hand and pulled him in his own direction before slamming Takeru into the ground.

《"Kusanagi, enemy! Hide yourself!"》

Late by a moment, a message from Kyouya had entered his ear.

As the debris of the wooden floor had scattered, Hayato shouted to everyone.

"——All of you get down!"

He was so intimidating, everyone on spot reflexively got down on their faces.

Immediately after, something had almost grazed their heads.

The walls, floor, pillars, all of it had continued to rupture with a popping sound. The only ones that realized they were targeted by someone else other than Hayato was just Usagi and Ouka.

The first blow had come from a sniper. Following it started a barrage from a machine gun.

Hayato grasped Takeru's collar and with abandon he slid Takeru all the way to the window, then Hayato himself slid taking a refuge beside.

Ouka grasped Mari's uniform and pulled her back, Usagi had followed Hayato pushing Ikaruga's waist and rolling her forward.

《"!! This bunch is the EXE with mass-produced models...! I'm in combat now! I'll protect the entrance, you guys do something about the snipers!"》

Mixed with the sound of shooting and combat, Kyouya could be heard.

The enemy's EXE? Then, what was this man doing here?

"You guys, what did you come here for."

Before he could ask, Hayato asked him in cold voice.

Takeru slowly regained his calm and braced himself.

"And why is Kurogane-san here?"

"I'm the one asking questions. Answer."

"I refuse. If you don't answer, I'm not going to answer either."

Even though they were helped, Takeru said so without drawing back an inch.

Hayato glanced at him from above.

Honestly speaking, it was so intimidating he felt like disappearing.

Then Hayato looked away from Takeru and looked at the floor of the office.

Takeru's line of sight was also lured in there.

In there, fell a single black notebook.

That was what Hayato was holding when he came to the sixth floor.

He must have let go of it when he helped Takeru.

"...that notebook, can it be..."

"....."

"Kurogane-san's the same as us——!!"

When he spoke up to there, his mouth was jammed.

That was because Hayato looked down at Takeru with clear intent to kill.

——I won't let you have it.

That's what his eyes said.

Takeru clenched his fist, then alternated between looking at the notebook and Hayato. In that notebook, without a doubt was information about Sougetsu, written by Mineshiro Kazuma.

"...khh..."

"....."

Putting his legs at the wall, Takeru was ready to leap at any time, Hayato made a similar stance.

This man might not be their enemy, but he isn't an ally either.

That was clear as a day. This man definitely wouldn't pass the document to Takeru and others.

Bullets were still flying over their heads. Most likely they were being fired at from the building on the opposite side of the street.

If he triggers the Soumatou he will be able to avoid the bullets and recover the document. Takeru's body was different from the past and if by chance he was hit by a bullet he would activate Witch Hunter form and survive.

Rather than the bullets, this man was the problem.

He had no idea how strong was Hayato. Although it was obvious at a glance that he was strong, Takeru didn't know how strong was he.

Could he recover the document faster than this man, while avoiding bullets at the same time?

It's not about whether I can——I'm doing it!

It couldn't be helped even if he thought, he had to believe in himself. Choosing the timing, he put strength into his feet.

He was going to jump during the short moment enemy was reloading.

————*Now!*

The moment he released strength from his legs in order to leap by kicking off the wall.

——From above, something had come flying in through the window.

He triggered Soumatou and tried to desperately suppress the momentum of the jump, but unable to completely kill it his body had launched while rotating.

In the slow-motion world, Takeru continued to look. A strange man wearing an EXE uniform had jumped into the office.

He had a wire hook attached to his waist. He had jumped in after attaching the wire from the roof on the opposite side.

The man held a gun in his hand and aimed the muzzle at Takeru at the same time as he jumped in.

——This is bad. I can't avoid it in this posture.

The moment he thought so, Hayato who was beside him grasped his shoulder and returned him back to his original location.

Hayato and the stranger glared at each other, pointing muzzles at each other.

But they didn't shoot.

Even though they aimed at each other, they didn't fire.

When Takeru's dynamic vision had returned back to normal, the man slid on the ground as the slow-motion had melted. He picked the document under his feet and directed his muzzle at Hayato again.

"...Jougasaki."

Hayato called the man's name.

The man called Jougasaki had put the document in his bosom and disconnected the wire from his waist.

The shooting had already stopped.

Jougasaki glared at Hayato.

"I have misjudged you Senpai. I didn't think you would betray us."

"I told you not to follow me."

"We will follow. It's Chairman's order after all. I'm an inquisitor and you're now a criminal. I won't listen to your order no more."

Holding guns in both hands, Jougasaki firmly aimed the iron sights between Hayato's eyebrows.

Hayato too, put strength into the finger on 0.50 caliber gun's trigger.

In this tense atmosphere, the platoon members all were almost struck breathless.

"Senpai, please surrender. I don't want to kill you and I don't want juniors over there be in any more danger than this."

"....."

"The newcomer bunch won't listen to my orders. This negotiation is the last chance. If you're to surrender, it's your only chance...!"

"....."

"Senpai...!"

As Jougasaki appealed, Hayato narrowed his eyes slightly.

Takeru only knew their relationship was that of a boss and a subordinate. Judging from the conversation, Hayato was no longer the EXE's captain but was instead treated as a criminal and pursued by inquisition. Judging from the fact he had followed after Mineshiro Kazuma's document, it was reasonable to think that the charges must have been prepared by Ootori Sougetsu, however...

What to do, if we're caught here we won't be able to return to Heretic Alliance...! I won't be able to save Kiseki...! I don't know why is Kurogane-san here, but we can't draw back now...!

Takeru called out to Lapis in his head.

《"Lapis, can you turn into Witch Hunter form instantly...?"》

《"It's possible, but without a chant and a magical circle there will be a several seconds of lag in armor's construction. Meanwhile, Host will be vulnerable."》

《"OK then... I'll manage somehow...!"》

He stopped his breathing and tried to put his fingers on the sword's handle.

But,

"Hey, junior. Don't strain yourself. Stay quiet there."

Still pointing his gun at Hayato, Jougasaki aimed his blood-lust at Takeru.

Takeru's hand stopped just before touching the sword's handle.

The thirst for blood that didn't lose to that of Hayato's had sent chills down his spine.

"You're the 35th Test Platoon right. I won't say anything about it, so just surrender here."

"...that's not going to happen...!"

Glaring at Jougasaki, Takeru looked for a chance.

Still focusing his gaze on Hayato, Jougasaki smiled.

"I wonder, why is the majority of the Small Fry Platoon's captains so stubborn... what do you think, Senpai?"

"……?"

Puzzled, Takeru looked at Hayato.

There was no change in Hayato, he continued staring at Jougasaki.

Jougasaki shrugged lightly and said.

"Senpai and I were members of 35th Test Platoon from several generations ago. That said, after becoming a third year Senpai had joined the student council, so it was just for one year. I didn't enroll in the same year as Senpai but I was the same."

"——Eh?! R-really?!"

Takeru had involuntarily asked Hayato.

Hayato did not respond.

Jougasaki laughed mischievously, his muzzle still aiming at Hayato.

"I'm Jougasaki Mamoru, nice to meet you Kusanagi. Even though it turned out like this, I'm glad to meet you. See, Small Fry Platoon is actually a little bit special, it seems to be a Chairman's hobby and a tradition to group up strange guys in there. Did you know?"

"...I-I didn't... is that so..."

"Doesn't it just gather people with peaky performance? I was no different back then you see. Outside of practicals my performance was terrible～, back then my only saving grace was Dragoon piloting skills."

Laughing cheerfully, Jougasaki said "how nostalgic" about the story from the past.

Since it was an interesting story, Takeru's expression had loosened.

At the same time as the third year students from the test platoon graduate, the first year students are given their platoon number. So the platoon numbers among the first, second and third years are all over and random.

He thought it was a strange coincidence.

The seniors from the previous Small Fry Platoons must have been unable to bear the burden.

When Takeru thought so,

"Kusanagi, why do you let him coax you here, it's obviously a lie."

"——Haa!"

Ouka cut in and Takeru's sanity had returned. He noticed that his comrades were all staring at him intently.

Why are you, the pursued getting along with the pursuer... Takeru had focused himself again.

Mamoru smiled wryly.

"Ootori, it's not a lie. It's been a while since I've seen you too, been healthy?"

"...Jougasaki-san."

Ouka stared at Mamoru with a complex expression.

Thinking well about it, Mamoru was Ouka's senior from her EXE era. She must have had mixed feelings when meeting him as enemies.

"What I said earlier is all true. That's not much of a reason, but I don't want to hurt you guys."

He erased his smile and said so with a serious expression.

"I'll arrange with Chairman so that nothing bad happens to you. That's why, surrender."

With a gentle voice, Mamoru asked his comrades to surrender.

However, not a single person had responded positively to his request.

Mamoru sighed.

"Senpai... if you surrender, the junior will be convinced as well."

"....."

"Convince those guys together with me... please...!"

Compelling earnestly, aiming the muzzle at Hayato, Mamoru had begged him.

"....."

Hayato didn't even budge, he quietly closed his narrowed eyes.

Then he lowered the gun's muzzle and placed it on the floor.

Even though Takeru was puzzled, he followed Hayato's movements with his eyes.

"...I get it."

Hearing Hayato answer so, Mamoru made a relieved expression.

The gun placed on the floor was pressed and slid on the floor.

The gun was sliding towards Mamoru.

In order to stop the gun with his foot, just for an instant Mamoru had lowered his line of sight.

——In that instant, in the exact same posture Hayato had jumped using his legs like a spring.

"!"

Mamoru was horrified, but Hayato had already jumped on him.

Hayato's knee had burst right at Mamoru's cheek.

At the same time as Hayato landed, he reached out to Mamoru's pocket.

"Khh!"

Mamoru had predicted the document would be aimed for and grabbed Hayato's arm, attempting to twist it in resistance.

Unaffected, Hayato had grasped Mamoru's hand instead and used a shoulder throw to fling him outside through the window.

The moment Mamoru fell of the window, he fired bullets at Hayato.

Hayato slightly averted his body, avoiding the gunfire.

Mamoru was falling from the window.

"Fireee!!"

When Mamoru shouted in mid-fall, the barrage had resumed.

Dodging the rain of bullets assaulting him, Hayato slid returning back to where Takeru was.

Then, he put a hand on Takeru's shoulder who had drooped low on one knee and moved his face closer.

While Takeru was still stunned by Hayato's smart and bold action, Hayato spoke.

"Kusanagi, there's no time. Take your comrades and escape from Critical Point, then return back to where you were. I will recover Mineshiro's records. Don't involve yourself in this any further."

"T-there's no way I can do that! You know my circumstances, right?! I——"

bam

As if to stop him from speaking foolishly, Hayato hit the wall.

Hayato's pupils were filled with anger.

"——Be reasonable if you're a captain, Kusanagi. What you're doing now is a brat's selfishness."

"Wh...at...?!"

"I'm saying that if you hold your comrades dear, then you shouldn't fight."

What Hayato said had pierced through Takeru's chest.

The reason his chest ached was clear.

He had been pierced by the anguish he was always bearing.

Hayato put a hand on the window frame and moved his face away from Takeru.

"——Escape. Don't fight. That's the only way left to you."

Saying so, Hayato had jumped over the window frame and outside.

He fired from the sixth floor downward. At the same time, the enemies who were firing a barrage from the building on the opposing side had jumped outside the window, chasing Hayato. Fierce sounds of combat could be heard from the street beneath.

《"Hey...! The majority of enemy is chasin' after Kurogane...! What the hell's goin' on Kusanagi!"》

As Takeru was now, Kyouya's voice didn't reach him.

Hayato's words were still stuck in his chest.

Don't fight if you hold your comrades dear.

He had always been anguished over it. The reason his comrades fought now, was for his sake.

Hayato told him not to involve his comrades for his own convenience.

I know that even without him telling me...!

That's right, he knew.

The pain in his chest, the pressure, he intended to move forward while bearing it.

Takeru raised his face.

"The objective has been stolen, Ouka, Mari and I are going to recover it! Usagi and Suginami are to remain here. I want Kyouya to protect this place until we come back!"

《"What about enemy snipers? I'm in the snipers' blind spot here, but will we be able to escape from here? If we get hit by anti-magic bullets we won't be off so easily, even with Witch Hunter form on."》

"....."

《"I'm still fighting the mass-produced ones. I can't see snipers from here. What do we do?"》

In middle of combat, Kyouya calmly asked.

The snipers who were aiming for Takeru at first must have been still aiming for this location.

This newspapers' company building was taller than the ones surrounding it. Most likely enemy was aiming at this office from a higher location in the distance. Judging from the places hit on the floor, the entire office must have been in the enemy's sights.

There were absolutely no obstacles like chairs or desks in the office. Whether they jump from the window or run down the stairs to the first floor, they would be in the enemy's line of fire. And above all, ignoring the snipers and going for their objective was reckless, they had no idea where they were being targeted from.

That's when Usagi who was beside Takeru had pulled on his clothes.

"I-I shall... do something about the snipers."

Usagi's mouth formed a ∧ shape and she volunteered to take on the snipers.

"We'll temporarily block the visibility with the smoke and then you three should escape from here while it lasts. Once the enemy learns we also have a sniper, they shall not let their eyes off me. It is unlikely they shall aim for you."

"...Usagi, can you do it?"

"Believe in me."

She proudly puffed up her chest and from her pocket she took out a compact mirror used for putting on make-up.

In order to find the enemy's location she had the mirror peek out through the window's frame.

Momentarily——the compact mirror had shattered.

The mirror had peeked out only a few centimeters, yet it was destroyed by the enemy sniper.

"...t-t-ttt-they are quite good〜."

Usagi looked at Takeru with tears in her eyes and laughed forcibly.

As expected of EXE. The sniper's skill might have been as good as Usagi's.

"Leave scouting to me. I'll somehow manage."

Ikaruga opened the gun case Usagi had brought and took out six spheres of a ping-pong ball's size that were socketed on the side.

They were reconnaissance UAV's. When thrown into the air they grew fairy-like wings and flew out of the window.

Mounting goggles to watch the video coming from the UAV's Ikaruga smiled fearlessly.

"These are improved UAV's. They're so small it's practically impossible to shoot them dow——"

Ikaruga's smile froze.

".....all of them got shot down."

"D-don't lie. It's a moving target of ping-pong ball's size right? Sniped down? It hasn't been even 7 seconds since they started flying?"

"I'm serious. The enemy sniper's skill isn't 'just' outstanding. But I got their position and distance."

She checked the distance to the enemy displayed on the goggles.

Furrowing her eyebrows, Ikaruga had a little bit of difficulty relaying it to Usagi.

"...the direction is north-northwest, you'll know it once you see it, it's an old clock tower... distance is 1400 meters."

1400 meters.

From such distance, they had managed to hit a few centimeters big, moving target. The weather was sunny but the wind was tremendous. The trajectory would deviate greatly and it should also take two to three seconds until the bullet hit.

They had calculated that much and then sniped a moving target?

Even Takeru who was ignorant in regards to sniping gasped.

However, Usagi pulled the bolt of the sniper rifle "Rabbit Fang" and put a bullet inside.

"——Please tell me the exact position and the speed of wind."

Very calmly Usagi had requested of Ikaruga.

* * *

North-northwest of the newspaper's office Takeru and others were in, she was on a 60 meters tall clock tower built before the war.

On the platform for the clock's adjustment she had expanded a bi-pod and looked through the scope in a sitting position.

With hair roughened by the wind, Himemiya Iori had communicated with Jougasaki Mamoru.

"Reporting for now. Everyone else other than captain Kurogane is confined inside the newspaper's building."

《"OK. Continue confining them. You just have to make it so they can't even flinch."》

"I'm not a good person like you, Mamoru. If needed I'll shot these children as well. How about you?"

《"...negotiations failed. I'm in a mad dash chasing after Senpai."》

"That makes me envious."

《"It feels like chasing a battle robot from a b-class film... don't joke around."》

"I'm not joking."

Iori pulled the bolt and said so with a cool expression.

Mamoru said "uwaah..." with a slightly drawn-out voice.

"Mamoru, are you fighting Captain?"

《"...it seems like I will."》

"Good for you. Didn't you say you wanted to seriously go against him once?"

Laughing quietly, Iori turned her eyes away from the light.

"But let me tell you, if you by any chance hurt that person——I'll murder you, so prepare yourself."

《"...really, don't speak of impossible."》

After their conversation finished, Iori returned to monitoring the newspaper building again.

Although they seemed to be hidden by the window wall, Iori had seen them all.

"...tricks won't work on me, kids."

As she squinted, her eye had momentarily sparkled.

Himemiya Iori's Relic Eater, "Daji" wasn't the sniper rifle she was poising now. It was a normal long distance sniper rifle.

Her Relic Eater was currently circling around far above, in the sky.

Daji wasn't made in a shape of a gun, it was a stealth fighter that could fly independently. Both Daji's shape and performance was unusual.

This Relic Eater could sense the movement of all magical power within the radius of two kilometers and could predict activation of witch's magic. That wasn't all, since it could observe

movement of natural magical power contained in the air it could use magical power to act as a sonar, allowing her to know everyone's positions.

Additionally, they were in Critical Point. Since normally it was swallowed up in the Sanctuary, the concentration of magical power in the air was high.

With that Daji could not only grasp the movements far away, but by collecting information from the magical power in the air it also could predict how the target would move and input the predicted values into Iori's retina.

Therefore, no matter how intense the wind was, no matter how bad was the visibility or where they attempt to hide, she knew how to shoot to hit the enemy no matter where the enemy was hidden.

Although Iori wasn't originally a sniper, Daji's performance could be taken full advantage of in the Critical Point and gave her sniping ability not inferior to Oonogi Kanata, a former colleague of hers.

"...oh, smoke? It won't work."

A smokescreen was ineffective against Daji.

She could clearly see the 35th platoon behind the window's wall take out a smoke grenade from a backpack.

They want to use the smokescreen to blind me and have those three jump out all at once, huh. That small girl... she's going to cover them with snipe?

Iori licked her lips with her tongue and put a finger on the trigger.

"At this distance she intends to focus on me in an instant...?"

Iori had immediately decided on who to shoot.

The first one to peek out would be Kusanagi Takeru. Following him would be Ouka and Mari. In the end, Usagi would appear to cover them.

The first to aim at would be the boy. He's a contractor, he won't die if he's shot through the shoulder... well, my sniping skills aren't that good so don't hate me if I hit your head.

Iori laughed and opened both of her eyes.

She had determined Usagi not to be a threat.

At this distance and with this wind, hitting her was absolutely impossible, she thought.

Smoke rose up in the sixth floor of the newspaper's office.

Four people stood up in the smoke-filled room.

She could see them all.

I'm sorry about this.

Iori focused on Takeru's silhouette and tried to squeeze the gun's trigger.

——*pshwoo*

It was exactly at that time that she heard the sound of wind being cut.

There was sound of an impact behind Iori and the wall part of the clockwork had broke.

A tuft of hair by Iori's ear had been blown off and fell like flower petals.

She felt faint pain in her cheek, blood was dripping down.

She was grazed, shot. From that distance, in an instant——?!

"——!!"

Iori raised her gun and kicked open the door to the control room.

She rolled inside the control room and hid herself.

At the same time another bullet had landed in almost the same location.

Even though Iori had furrowed her eyebrows, her mouth drew an arc as if to say "interesting".

"Usagi-chan, was it? She's unexpectedly dangerous, I'll have her retire."

Iori pulled on the bolt and peeking out from behind the wall, she fired between Usagi's eyebrows, who was in the newspaper's office.

"——Ugh!!"

The moment Usagi had confirmed the hidden target had shown its face and poised the gun, she instantly lowered her head.

One second later a bullet had passed over her head and hit the office's floor.

Fast. Although she was surprised that her second shot was avoided by the sniper, she didn't think they would fire at her immediately after rebuilding the posture.

Usagi leaned on the wall and shortly exhaled, then pulled the bolt loading next bullet.

If not for Suginami's information I definitely would have been shoot... it's as if she could see my movements while I'm hidden...

From the experience she amassed in battle so far, there was no one who had targeted her as fast and accurately. She was able to do so because she had a spotter UAV, but since the UAV was destroyed the next time it won't go so well.

She was indoors as well and unable feel the wind. Since the wind speed was constantly changing, information from a moment ago wasn't reliable.

Usagi looked if she could find something outside the window while making sure not to peek out.

Outside the window, an old Japanese flag was shaking on the wind.

I can roughly tell what's the wind with that.

Just in case she gave "stay silent" sign to Ikaruga and moved under the by crawling.

The other side must have also changed their position...! I'll pass on being counter-sniped again, I need to hurry!

After going into the corner of the room she hid her body behind the pillar, then holding her breath she turned her muzzle towards the clock tower again.

There were three points on the clock tower from which enemy could snipe.

The scaffolding for the clock adjustment where the target had lingered just a moment earlier, the emergency exit and spiral staircase ending 30 meters away from the clock tower and the skylight in the roof of the clock tower.

Other than that, there was no place to aim at them from.

...where will it come from...!

She raised a shout and even though her eye was going dry, she continued to open it wide.

In this situation, she would be hit first.

Usagi continued to focus on the tree points.

...not coming... they are teasing me...!

Impatience was the sniper's taboo. Forcing down emotions and calmly searching from where the target is shooting was an iron rule. It's not a battlefield of fighting spirit and guts. It's skill and composure rather than speed.

Usagi didn't survive this long sniping just for show.

She recalled the days in the snow-covered mountains hunting for deers with her grandfather and her experience from the battlefield.

Calmly, she cleared her mind as clean as snow...

"———"

She had erased her expression and like a beast, she calmly waited for her prey to appear.

There were three points to snipe.

No. That's not it.

Usagi considered another possibility and looked at the clock tower's surface.

The bricks were coated with concrete from above for hardening. However, the concrete had peeled off because of age and there was a gap between crumbling bricks.

Her hunch was on spot. There was a muzzle protruding from the gap between the bricks.

And, the pupils like that of a leopard, aiming at her——

"Found you."

Usagi pulled the trigger without hesitation.

She gave priority to speed rather than accuracy. While she thought it's better to shoot before the opponent does, at the same time as she had shot the opponent did the same.

At the same time she saw a brick at opponent's location break off,

"Kyaaa!!'

The enemy's bullet had grazed Usagi's head and she had fell on her back.

"Usagi!"

Ikaruga was about to rush over to her, but Usagi screamed "Don't come!" and immediately took refuge under the window.

A bullet had grazed her temple and blood was dripping down.

It was a minor injury, but if she continues to bleed her consciousness would turn faint. That would be fatal to a sniper.

Even though they shot simultaneously, they didn't hit each other.

She was sure of it, that sniper was all right. All she did was to crush the brick wall.

What she has to do is to ensure another position to snipe and make the first move.

There should be time until enemy makes their move. That was Usagi's only advantage.

She loaded a bullet and shown herself again.

Come!!

Usagi lowered the scope's magnification and looked at the entire clock tower.

Five seconds later. The target had shown its whole body from the end of the spiral staircase.

"Khh!"

She instantly raised the magnification, adjusted the angle to match the distance and wind speed, then tried to squeeze the trigger.

"——No!!"

Usagi hid her body behind the pillar.

Once again at the same time the enemy's bullet exploded on the floor. If she had remained there pulling the trigger, Usagi would be already dead.

Even though she was already waiting for the enemy, they were slightly faster.

It was as if Usagi's position was known before they have looked into the scope.

Since then, she had repeated the same thing many times, undaunted.

The result was same every time.

The enemy fired before she could... they were one step ahead.

Hiding behind the pillar holding the gun, Usagi spat her breath roughly.

She was bleeding too much from her head and her consciousness was fading.

What to do... I need to think... enemy is not a simple sniper. Even if I change location, Kirigaya is in combat below. If I move outside I'll just be a nuisance to him.

Biting her lower lip, Usagi looked for a method to break through.

Although Rabbit Fang could be filled with magical power and could shoot it, in exchange for being unaffected by wind and gravity, the kill zone's limit was 500 meters. I don't know how, but all my movements are probably seen. I'm being aimed at immediately after they look into the scope. That's inhuman skill.

Shaking her head as she grew faint, Usagi continued to think.

The enemy's rifle emphasizes on accuracy while mine has an anti-materiel specification. The recoil is high and there's a quirk to it. It is unsuitable to aim at a small target a human is.

Usagi put a nail between her teeth and chewed it lightly.

She thought she was being checkmated, that's when.

".....anti-materiel?"

Usagi noticed something very basic.

Anti-materiel rifle. Anti-material. It's not intended for aiming at people, it was a rifle for aiming at objects.

Holding her mouth, Usagi opened her eyes wide.

A vision of her shooting from earlier had revived. Not only this gun had power to break through bricks and concrete at that distance, the buildings in this entire area were ageing.

Usagi had stretched her face and quietly laughed.

"——I found a way out!"

She raised the gun and stood up again.

Hiding behind the pillar she calmed her breathing.

It might take time, but she had enough bullets.

She resolved herself and once again aimed at the clock tower.

There was no need to aim at a moving target. All she had was to aim accurately at one point.

The trigger was pulled and the muzzle spat out fire.

"....."

While moving to change the sniping point, Iori heard sound of impact.

gon, **gonn*... a dull and heavy sound echoed in the clock tower.

".....what is she shooting at?"

Thinking anxiously, Iori opened the emergency door and hid herself, then received information from Daji.

She could see it. Saionji Usagi was shooting at something without trying to hide.

At what?

The impact resounded like a bell. Together with the sound, the clock tower shook slightly and debris had come down from the ceiling.

gon, *gon*... as the eerie sound echoed, Iori looked towards the ceiling and was horrified.

The time between each time building shook had grown shorter, the shaking became stronger.

"——No way!"

She raised her gun in a hurry and aimed at Usagi.

Iori was noticed, but still looked at Usagi who was clenching her teeth.

However, Usagi didn't stop shooting even though she had noticed Iori.

Usagi——was aiming and shooting at the corner of a square clock tower, at the pillar.

"She wants to destroy the building itself?!"

Although she wanted to align her reticle with Usagi, she was unable to because of shaking.

She missed two shots, the moment she had raised her face from the scope with a pale expression,

The pillar of the clock tower broke with a crackling sound.

——*gryunn*...!

Making a rumbling sound, the clock tower had started to collapse losing its support. The aged clock had collapsed after losing just a single pillar.

"What a girl...!"

Looking up at the clock tower collapsing at her, Iori shouted with both praise and humiliation.

The emergency exit was in the middle of clock tower. As the rubble had broken off and fell on her, Iori ran to outside, falling down.

There were 30 meters to the surface.

"——Come, Daji!"

She shouted while dropping down.

When she did, far from the sky something had dropped down at breakneck speed.

It was the stealth fighter Relic Eater, Daji.

Below Iori's feet a pale yellow magical circle was deployed.

About 10 meters away from the surface, Iori articulated words of power.

"Summis desiderantes affectibus——Malleus Maleficarum!"

And, just before she hit the ground, Himemiya Iori's body was wrapped in light.

* * *

After escaping from the newspaper's building, Takeru, Ouka and Mari had chased after Kurogane Hayato and Jougasaki Mamoru.

They've heard in what direction had Hayato gone, but since the path was convoluted they didn't know where exactly was he going.

"Ouka, can you find their position from the sky, try it if possible."

When Takeru had stopped his feet and instructed her, Ouka triggered the Witch Hunter form and spreading the wings she had raised up to the sky.

From the Critical Point's empty sky, Ouka glared at the ground.

"Vlad, try searching for the smell of Jougasaki-senpai's blood. It was very slight, but he bled when he was hit by captain Kurogane."

《"It was very slight. It shouldst take a minute, wait a moment... by the way, Master. "》

While Vlad sharpened her sense of smell, he spoke to Ouka.

《"Fighting Kurogane Hayato isn't a good idea. That man is strong."》

"...I know. If possible I don't want to fight him either. I was surprised to see that person be chased by Inquisition."

《"The cause of that is most likely thy father, Kazuma. Were I to describe the relationship between Kazuma and Kurogane, it would be hostile superi'r and subordinate... to Kurogane, Kazuma wilt hast been an insufferable man. "》

Even though you aren't related by blood he was more stubborn than Master, Vlad added.

《"After Kazuma had involv'd himself with Heretic Alliance he nay used me no longer. . . so I know nothing of what betid to him afterwards."》

"....."

《"However, wast he to entrust important information to an inquisitor, it would be doubtlessly Kurogane. In a sense, that hostile relation allow'd him to trust Kurogane."》

It was something Ouka heard for the first time.

Her father told Ouka nothing about being an inquisitor. Kurogane's name hasn't appeared even once back then.

The Heretic Alliance learned just recently of the whereabouts of the document left by Mineshiro Kazuma.

Kazuma seemed to have left the most important secrets of the Heretic Alliance to one successor in a safe deposit box.

He had them promise "Not to open it at all costs unless another Witch Hunt War happens". The reason was, it's opening would spread confusion around the world.

Then, when Hoshijiro Nagaru had succeeded it and the Second Witch Hunt War had broke out, the safe was breached.

Inside, was a note with the document's location.

《"He was a guy who despite distress, had engag'd himself in two trades at the same time. He wanted to leave information to a trust'd inquisitor and a trust'e person in Heretic Alliance. To hide it in a bizarre and empty place like this... his weird romantic sense was similar to that of Master's."》

Mmm, mm. Vlad spoke heartily as if he was a man speaking to his grandchildren. As expected, Ouka has had enough and was fed up with it.

"〜〜〜Nhh, why are you always talking about my father whenever there's something to do! Hurry up and look for the blood's scent!"

《"What, I just spoke about Master's father for a——"》

That's when Vlad's voice in her head was interrupted for a moment.

And the next moment,

《"Everyone! Sniper has escaped! Enemy is flying your way!"》

A transmission from Usagi had come in.

The sniper was... flying?

Although she didn't understand what was said for a moment, she understood enemy was coming in their direction and flapping wings she had returned back to the ground.

《"——Avoid! Enemy from the rear!"》

As Vlad shouted, tension had ran through Ouka's spine.

Before confirming the enemy she inverted her body and took evasive action injecting magical power into the wings and moving horizontally.

Immediately after——along with a fierce wind pressure something had passed beside her.

"Wha!!"

The flow of the air had been violently disturbed and shook Ouka. She somehow rebuilt her posture and stopped in the air, expanding her wings.

The enemy was hovering around 300 metres away from Ouka.

Mechanical wings and a tremendous amount of magical power being ejected from the ejection ports in the back. Machine guns reminiscent of Gatling gun equipped on both shoulders, missile pods on the sides of both legs.

Wearing a huge exterior and standing in the air was a tall woman.

Himemiya Iori. A senior in whose care Ouka was in her Dullahan era.

"It's been a while, Ouka-san."

Ejecting magical power from the jet pack on her back and the back of her legs, Iori smiled at Ouka.

"...Himemiya-senpai, did you too come here following captain Kurogane...?"

"I won't answer your questions. Also, captain Kurogane is no longer your captain."

Still smiling, Iori had refused to answer Ouka's question.

Ouka herself didn't want to fight her. When she had entered the EXE, Jougasaki Mamoru and Himemiya Iori often took care of her.

Iori was a kind senior of hers. Since Ouka was not accustomed to her comrades, she went to talk with her whenever there was a need.

Confronting her as an enemy now made Ouka's chest tighten.

"I'm an inquisitor. Whatever the reason is, I cannot allow a criminal act. You illegally use a Relic Eater, as part of Heretic Alliance you threaten Inquisition and the general public. Even if you aren't a witch, I must punish you."

Indifferently, Iori had branded Ouka a criminal.

Certainly, Iori was her kind senior.

But Ouka remembered that this person wasn't a halfway friendly senior of hers. She separated work from private affairs, being a person more cruel than anyone else. Speaking of her lack of mercy, she was beyond Kurogane Hayato or Ouka herself.

"...is captain Kurogane to you a target to penalize as well?"

Ouka asked.

Iori had absolute trust in Hayato. While it could be called loyalty, she had been yearning towards Hayato.

".....that's right. That person too, is now my enemy. We were educated by the person himself not to show any mercy towards defectors."

After a moment, with unmoving expression Iori had affirmed it.

"You too were taught that weren't you, Ouka-san."

Ouka closed her eyes just once, resolving herself.

Aiming the machine guns on her shoulders at Ouka, Iori gazed her with eyes cold as ice.

"Call for surrender, if you do we'll ignore you."

"...we can't let ourselves be caught here."

"Then, don't hate me if I kill you off with excess momentum."

The machine guns had heated up, firing magical bullets.

An unique sound of machine gun's rapid fire had roared, magical bullets assaulted Ouka.

Ouka soured in the sky ejecting magical power, avoiding the storm of magical bullets. She shouldn't lose when it comes to the flight speed.

"Kusanagi, Nikaido, you two go ahead chase the document."

《"You intend to fight EXE member alone?!"》

Hearing Takeru's desperate voice, Ouka chuckled while flying in the sky.

She was honestly happy seeing him worry.

"You can't fly, right. Go."

After one-sidedly cutting off the communication, Ouka accelerated.

The barrage of magical bullets couldn't keep up with her. The point of impact was slightly shifted from where she was.

Seeing a chance when the barrage had ceased, Ouka turned around in the air.

And, the moment she had turned herself in Iori's direction to launch an attack,

"——You're too slow."

Iori was already in front of her.

She was speechless for just a fraction of a second. Poising Vlad in both hands in front of herself, Ouka immediately fired the stakes made from magical power. However, Iori didn't mind the muzzles aimed at her avoided while shooting Ouka at the same time.

"Impossible!!"

Iori was too fast.

To think Daji was a Relic Eater specializing in flight...!

"As long as you use magical power for your attacks, I can read them all!"

The machine gun on Iori's shoulder raised a growl and showered Ouka with magical bullets.

Ouka instantly extended her wings, making them function as a shield blocking the magical bullets.

"Ghh...!"

One by one the magical bullets were weak, but with a rapid fire at close range it was completely different.

The hardened wings had cracks soundly appear on it.

As long as she had the wings extended, she couldn't avoid.

《"If Vampire form was available, this much would be...!"》

If as Vlad said, Vampire form was available, the situation would be different but there was not enough blood supply in this location. Ouka couldn't take Vampire form with just her blood. Even if it was, her life would be in danger after a few seconds and would have to be cancelled.

She had finally gave up on enduring the machine gun's fire and tried to temporarily expand her wings to take distance.

"I said, you're too slow."

When she tried to open up her wings, between one wing and another Iori's kick had burst into Ouka's abdomen.

It was so strong Ouka was unable to even groan. With the magic booster's sudden acceleration the kick had much higher power than the machine guns.

Ouka had folded into a 〈 shape and blown away.

While enduring pain she ejected magic from the gap in her armor, braking, and managed to stop in middle of being blown away.

"Vlad, I want some info about that Daji...!"

Ouka had never fought against Iori for real. She didn't know any details about her nor the Relic Eater.

《"Daji can read the flow of magical power. Regardless of whe'r in 'r outside corse, it's a relic eater that can yea sense the magical power in the air. "》

In other words, her movements that rely on magical power are completely read.

"And the sensing range?!"

《"Approximately two kilometers. Further than our attack range and outside of detection range of mine."》

"...khh!"

Ouka clenched her teeth and attempted to fight back with a gun.

She couldn't hit. Even though it had excellent penetration, in Witch Hunter form Vlad's stake was quite slow. Before that, Iori's flight speed was too high. Even if Ouka read ahead and fired considering opponent's speed, Iori just increased her speed further.

Since an operative procedure for releasing Witch Hunter form was in her head, if Vlad's stake passed through the magic, it would be possible to cancel Iori's Witch Hunter form in one shot.

But it was pointless if she couldn't hit. She couldn't do anything when everything was read ahead.

"Can't you do something like suppressing magical power consumption?!"

《"I told thee, it can sense small amounts of magical power in the air. If master moves, the magical power in the air shall move as well. It won't be overlook'd."》

Iori avoided Ouka's stake and turned around grandly, before suddenly surging upwards. Ouka hurriedly started rapid fire into the sky but not a single blow reached.

After raising about 400 meters above Ouka, Iori had stopped and inverted her body. Looking down at Ouka, Iori had greatly expanded the machine wings.

And she charged the missile pods on both feet with magical power.

"I wonder if using Vlad that's unsuitable for rapid fire you can take them all down?"

The moment Iori spread her arms, the missiles built with magic were fired both both pods at her feet.

While it seemed at first the missiles had scattered in the air at various trajectories, drawing spirals, all of them turned their warheads in Ouka's direction and attacked her in unison like meteors.

Ouka was speechless at the number of missiles raining from the sky.

"This number...!"

《"Intercept them!"》

Their number was about five hundred, they looked like a meteor shower.

The initial velocity of the missiles was low.

If she fired at them the number would decrease, but there was too many of them!

"These things...!'

She attempted to intercept them, but Vlad's stake could only process one at once. Although the missiles built with magic exploded when hit, since the explosion was of the same magic type the others weren't set off by it. Even if she tried to take them down with 《Tepes Rain》, in this position she would end up being caught up in her own magic.

"Khh...!"

Ouka was only able to take down about fifty.

Giving up on interception, Ouka had devoted herself to escaping from the missiles. Since they were guided, it was nearly impossible to avoid them. There was no choice but to wait for the magic to expire.

With a wave motion like a snake's movement, the missiles chased Ouka.

While she desperately tried to escape from missiles coming at her from all directions, the guidance and speed had surpassed her imagination.

《"No good! They caught up! Brace thyself!"》

Vlad autonomously rounded the wings, wrapping around Ouka's body.

Missiles covered all directions aiming at Ouka.

She resolved herself and prepared for impact.

"——《Aurora Counter》!"

But what has come wasn't impact and pain, but a sound of explosion and a familiar voice.

Along with a sound of something like laser emission, the magical missiles exploded.

When she opened her wings up and checked the status, the attacking missiles have been all shot down.

She saw scattered particles of magic and a figure coming up from the ground.

"You... why did you come."

Ouka asked with a frown, nearly clicking her tongue. Expanding transportation rings on her feet, Mari flew nearby Ouka.

Mari pursed her lips and expanded countless magical circles behind her back.

"I didn't really want to come. It was Takeru's order. Heck, what's with your attitude when you're struggling... if I didn't come you would end up horribly, wouldn't you."

"I-it's true I'm struggling, but is now the time to leave Takeru alone?!"

Being accused after coming to help, Mari furrowed her eyebrows and lined up next to Ouka.

"Since Kirigaya defeated the enemy he's going to Takeru. At least listen to comms——yop!"

"Ow!!"

Having her ear hit with a finger, Ouka in return shouted with anger.

"The communication is bad in Critical Point and hard to hear! I didn't have time in middle of combat!"

"Haa?! I've come to help and yet I'm snapped at?! Stop with your excuses!"

"It's not excuse! It's the truth! I didn't ask for hel——"

"——You two sure are close."

Immediately after Iori had interjected, the missiles were fired from the pods again.

Mari and Ouka who were quarreling couldn't immediately move.

The missiles approached. The two were engulfed in explosion without them using anything.

The explosion had perturbed Iori's hair.

Iori squinted as she glared through the explosion.

In that moment, from inside the explosion a single stake was fired and grazed Iori's face.

The magical particles and smoke had cleared.

What appeared from inside the smoke——was Mari who shot down all the missiles and Ouka who directed the muzzle at Iori.

" "We're not close!" "

In unison, the two loudly denied.

For just a moment Iori laughed enviously, then emitted thirst for blood from her eyes.

"...you've got a good combination of offense and defense. But as long as you rely on magic, you will never win."

Holding power that could be called incarnation of anti-magic, Iori ejected magical power from the booster rushing to Ouka and Mari.

Chapter 5 – EXE

After having Mari go support Ouka, Takeru ran through the Critical Point alone.

Not only Mamoru and Hayato were fast, he didn't know which way did they go. Even though Lapis searched for them, not only she was unsuitable for exploration, her searching range was further lowered in the Critical Point.

What Takeru could do was to follow footprints and not to miss even a faintest sound.

He had separated from comrades long time ago.

Just his impatience increased.

As if to add an insult to the injury, Lapis gasped.

《"Host... look at the plants around us."》

Doing as Lapis said, Takeru looked at the plant eroding a building in the Critical Point.

It wriggled.

The plant had repeated rapid growth and death.

It wasn't just plants.

The sand and stones on the ground were sinking or floating against the force of gravity.

"...this thing's the abnormal Critical Point's phenomenon?"

《"Soon enough this place will be swallowed by the Sanctuary. In addition to that, this place is very close to the Sanctuary inside the Critical Point. Magic transmission won't work well."》

Takeru tried to communicate with his comrades through the radio, but their voices didn't reach him. it was also unknown whether his voice had reached them.

He stopped once.

A thought of going back had crossed his mind.

《"...as for Ootori Sougetsu, I don't know much about him. When my consciousness had surfaced, I was already under control of that man."》

Numerous times in the shadow of history a person who seemed like Ootori Sougetsu had appeared.

Alive for several thousand years, an immortal being. An irregular always being there behind the scenes of history.

A smiling man full of mysteries.

《"The information concerning Ootori Sougetsu is without a doubt critical to Heretic Alliance. However, I do not feel it necessary enough to have Host's and everyone from the platoon risk their lives to obtain it."》

Certainly, it was just as Lapis said.

Aside from the fact it could be justified as required in order to stop Kiseki from being used as a weapon, if they were to save Kiseki, he couldn't care less about Ootori Sougetsu.

But, since that day he had decided not to kill Kiseki, Takeru knew.

Even if he saves Kiseki, even if he saves comrades, it'll be all for naught if the world is destroyed.

If the world is destroyed, he will lose all he holds dear.

Magnolia said that Sougetsu's goal is to destroy the world.

In that case, there was one answer.

It was an answer he had arrived many times already.

"...certainly... I don't care about the Chairman... about Ootori Sougetsu in the least. I'm not really interested in stuff like war. As long as Kiseki, my comrades and you are beside me, I'm satisfied."

《"....."》

"But that... I thought about it earlier, but these exist because world exists, right? If this world is destroyed, everything will disappear."

《"....."》

"That's why I had decided. If that person wants to destroy the world, if he has the power to do it, I need to kill him. I have to kill him in order to save the world."

《"....."》

"The mission given to me, is most likely for the sake of that—— I can't afford to abandon it."

After he finished speaking, Takeru started to run again. He repeated in the radio for ten minutes that his comrades should withdraw. He has no idea whether it had reached them, but he believed they would surely survive.

Of course, he had not the least intention of dying himself. He intended to return alive no matter what.

After a moment of silence, Lapis spoke in low voice.

《"...really, what a foolish man... world... you're burdening yourself with more extra weight..."》

Hearing that, Takeru smiled wryly and responded.

"I'm not bearing it alone. Right? Partner."

* * *

《"Currently, inquisitor Jougasaki had taken away what Kurogane Hayato was looking for and is on the run."》

Listening to the report from the field, Sougetsu who was cleaning the Relic Eater "Innocentius" stopped his hands and closed his eyes in silence.

The caller wasn't the subordinate who had been keeping in touch an hour ago but a separate Banshee troop directed to the Critical Point at the same time.

The detached force was ordered to monitor all the inquisitors on the scene.

"And what was it that Kurogane-kun was looking for?"

《"Something... like a document. We cannot check the contents, thus cannot describe."》

Sougetsu put Innocentius on the table, erasing expression he slightly opened his eyes.

"You are absolutely forbidden to check the contents. If you happen to see the contents of the document, you shall be immediately executed."

He could hear the subordinate gasp.

...a document. Most likely Mineshiro had left it. That's just like him, a nostalgic ideologist. He feared knowing of me, erased the information from his memory and left it on paper medium.

That's troublesome, Sougetsu made a smile reaching his eyes.

Although he told the subordinate they would be executed if they checked the contents, in the first place Sougetsu had no intention of leaving a single one who had gone to the Critical Point alive. He had planned to have all of them die on spot after the mission is finished.

However, the 35th Test Platoon coming to the scene was beyond his expectations.

Kusanagi-kun is the last one I want to see that document's contents. In order to have him destroy the world on schedule.

Seeing a situation he was afraid of slightly emerge, Sougetsu laughed.

The element of difficulty was one of the things he enjoyed.

Well, if it comes to worst I'll just use Kiseki-chan.

When Sougetsu tried to call out to the detached force to have them continue the monitoring,

《"However, Chairman..."》

"……?"

《"Currently... inquisitor Jougasaki is reading the contents. Although it's far, I have confirmed it."》

"I see I seee. Not a problem, continue monitoring."

《"Understood."》

Placing down the headset after finishing the call, Sougetsu heaved a sigh.

"...it can't be helped. To me too, it is difficult to rob a promising subordinate of his future..."

His voice tinged with sorrow, his expression said, Sougetsu muttered.

Turning the Innocentius in shape of a musket gun like a baton, he had set it up like a hunter.

And,

"————Just kiddin'."

With a familiar smile, he placed a finger on the trigger of betrayal.

* * *

The innermost part of the Critical Point. If he proceeded two hundred meters Kurogane Hayato would have entered the Sanctuary.

Hiding his body in the shade of a restaurant, he checked the square ahead.

There was a decayed fountain and at the square there were benches lined up exposed to wind and rain. Even now from the vestiges it could be felt that 150 years ago it was crowded with families.

Jougasaki Mamoru stood in the center.

Mamoru was dropping his line of sight at the document left behind by Mineshiro Kazuma. Hayato's fingertips had touched Caligula in the holster and he shown himself walking up to Mamoru.

Noticing the sound of footsteps Mamoru raised his face and looked up at the sky.

"...Senpai, did you betray us for information like this?"

"....."

"Why... even if this information is real... it's not a reason to betray Inquisition. So what if, is what it means."

"....."

"Senpai... what do you intend to do about Chairman?"

Wind blew passing between Hayato and Mamoru.

As Mamoru had asked, Hayato's expression didn't change at all.

"I'll decide on it after confirming that document. However, Ootori Sougetsu undoubtedly is already my enemy. No matter the method, I shall punish that man."

"Is it Hyakki Yakou's case? Since he plans to put it to military use Senpai had made Chairman his enemy?"

"That's not all. That man had exceeded what I deem acceptable by a wide margin. That's the reason."

"Then, was it really Senpai that had stolen Mephisto's body?"

"Correct."

"...to save Hyakki Yakou...?"

"If it's about Mephisto's body, it was to save Kusanagi Kiseki. Not for Hyakki Yakou."

Hayato said without hesitation.

A sound of Mamoru's fist being clenched had echoed.

"...right now the world is at war. I think that girl born as Hyakki Yakou is pitiful, but Senpai knows that unless we use what we can we cannot win against witches, right?"

"Of course. If we continue to allow the enemy one-sidedly invade as they are, Inquisition will lose this land."

"T-then——it's not time for beautiful acts!'

Mamoru swung his arm and shouted angrily.

"Using what can be used is Inquisition's way! Fight poison with poison! With how Senpai is thinking we too who use Relic Eaters are guilty!"

"....."

"Right now the humanity is half as numerous as it was before first Witch Hunt War! The witches had evolved in the sanctuary and had caught up with their science and technology to us, who spent 150 years for reconstruction! Whether guns or numbers, we can no longer win against them you know?!"

That's why it can't be helped that Hyakki Yakou is used as a weapon. Although what Mamoru said was cruel, it was also a sound argument.

"For such a thing, all alone you intend to make Inquisition your enemy?! Are you going to turn entire humanity into your enemies?! Senpai whom I know wasn't an idealist like that!"

"....."

"You from back when you were EXE's captain wouldn't be obsessed with such a short-term thing! Protecting humanity is our work!"

In silence Hayato had listened to Mamoru's shouts.

He thought it was all just as Mamoru said.

Humanity needed weapons that could serve as a deterrent so that they could avoid war. At the same time, if the war cannot be avoided, it might be true that they would have to show the might of their weapons.

However, to Hayato,

To Hayato's law——that was nothing but barbarism.

"What you're saying is correct. In order to aim for victory and peace, a deterrent is needed. Using the deterrent isn't a mistake either."

"...t-then!"

"——However, Kusanagi Kiseki is a human. Not a weapon. Using her as a weapon is *against my law.*"

Hayato pulled out Caligula from the pocket and aimed at Mamoru.

Speechless, Mamoru had gritted his teeth in response to Hayato's decision.

"...human? Such a thing, is human...?"

"Her body isn't human, but her heart is human's. Regardless of what the person herself wants, Inquisition using a *civilian* as a weapon something I cannot forgive."

"Civilian...? Don't make me laugh... just how much people had that killed? Did Senpai forget how many comrades we have lost to capture that?!"

Hayato remained silent for a moment.

There was no way he would forget, the tragedy that had occurred in the small village mountain.

Hyakki Yakou's emergence and the operation to capture it.

EXE had been called in and while they used full force during the operation, including Relic Eater contractors there were many inquisitors swallowed by Hyakki Yakou.

At that time, Hayato's regrets increased by one. Since he was unable to hold her down with just his own strength, his comrades had died for naught. Mamoru and Iori who just had entered EXE had also participated in the operation.

It must have been too ghastly sight for a rookie. The tragic death of comrades had planted darkness in Mamoru and Iori.

Back then Hayato felt it was all his responsibility. If he didn't call his comrades and continued alone with just his own strength, the result might have been different.

"I wouldn't forget. However, because I know how terrifying Hyakki Yakou is, I cannot allow it to be used as a weapon."

Hayato was adamant. He carried through with his law.

In contrast, Mamoru had presented the Inquisition's law.

The conflicting individuals glared at each other, not budging an inch.

"That thing is heretic...! It deserves to be used! What Chairman is doing is right!"

"Ootori Sougetsu not only uses Kusanagi Kiseki, he also used witches as an energy source for mass producing Relic Eaters. That man went against law. I can no longer overlook it."

"What's wrong in using witches for human's sakes! Laws are for the sake of humanity... that's what Senpai had said...!"

"Wrong. Law is for people. Witches are people too."

Once again the wind blew, the two's hair trailed after it.

Mamoru's who hung his head down raised his face in anger, his shoulders trembling.

"That's your law! It's not ours, Inquisitions law!"

Then, he spread his arms and shouted.

"——Come! 'Heliogabalus'!"

Momentarily, an ultramarine-colored magical circle appeared beneath Mamoru's feet and ultramarine magic had begun to converge behind him.

And, suddenly it had appeared.

Looking like a mass of iron, a rugged silhouette. Strong tracks that looked like they could trample even big trees. A huge gun barrel made to slaughter everything.

The Relic Eater "Heliogabalus". It's initial form was that of a tank.

Made at the same time as Daji, they were the youngest among Relic Eaters.

After summoning the tank, Mamoru and Hayato glared at each other.

"...It seems pointless to speak any more than this. That document is a tool needed to punish Ootori Sougetsu. If you do not feel like giving it up, I'll take it away by force."

"If you don't feel like surrendering, I'll make you surrender! I'll drag you back even if I have to use force!"

Hayato had resolved himself to fight his subordinate.

He no longer saw a way to push through other than to fight.

The two had clad themselves with the law they believed in——

"Summis desiderantes affectibus!"

"...Malleus Maleficarum."

An ultramarine and jet-black magical circles had wrapped around their master's bodies.

Caligula's magical circle was accompanied by black lightning as it turned Hayato into Witch Hunter form.

The jet-black armor was simple. As if to embody Hayato's beliefs it was black and smoothly protected his body. The exterior was reminiscent of wet lacquer, for some reason filling the ones who see it with awe. Slightly, something like a black miasma had drifted up from the armor.

In contrast, Mamoru's Witch Hunter form was very abnormal.

Not only it completely covered his body, but also wrapped around it. That figure was exactly like one of a modern tank operated like a Dragoon.

It was far more massive than Hayato, more mighty.

The right arm had a tank gun mounted on it, its muzzle was about the size of a human head. Hayato's Caligula had taken form of a 0.50 caliber revolver, looking incredibly small.

《"Aren't you going to use Maximilian?"》

Mamoru's voice had resounded from inside of Dragoon-type Relic Eater.

Still aiming Caligula at Mamoru, Hayato answered indifferently.

"Against you, this is enough."

From inside Heliogabalus Mamoru's laughing voice had resounded.

He had raised his right arm, poising the tank gun forward at Hayato's face.

《"You'll regret it, Senpai."》

And the next instant——the gun had blown fire.

Hayato avoided it just by slightly sliding to the side.

From just the shock the fountain and benches were blown away, the shell hit restaurant directly ahead and changed the building into a pile of rubble.

Mamoru must have guessed it would be avoided. He delivered a blow from the left arm, striking Hayato from the side.

In front of the huge fist approaching, Hayato attempted to escape by jumping.

Reading ahead it would be dodged by jumping, Mamoru stopped in middle of the blow. Despite being a huge bulk, the arm's movement was faster than Hayato. Heliogabalus had instantly bent its knee and its attack had changed into an uppercut, Mamoru's fist attacked leaping Hayato.

Got you, Mamoru didn't think anything like that. It was because the man called Kurogane Hayato had always surpassed everyone's expectations.

Hayato put his feet on the extended fist and on top of killing the uppercut's power he had used his legs as a spring

His body was blown 100 meters far into the sky.

《"Did you plan to end up flying?!"》

Aiming from below at the falling target was a great chance.

Mamoru expanded a stopper that supported Heliogabalus from the back and aimed the barrel towards the sky, preparing for the incoming recoil. It's body had tilted by forty degrees, aiming straight up.

And aiming for the moment Hayato starts falling, a shell was fired. With a loud sound and impact, the shell approached Hayato.

Falling, Hayato aimed his muzzle downwards and fired the Caligula on the verge of being hit.

——*bam*!

Caligula's bullet had collided with Heliogabalus' shell. Despite the fact shell was many times larger than the bullet, the power was evenly matched offsetting each other's explosion.

《"That's something only Relic Eater's specializing in destructive force can do! But——"》

In no time, Mamoru had begun rapid fire.

Two, three, four——five shots.

And then, he fired the sixth shot.

Hayato didn't intercept it. No, he couldn't.

《"Ammo loaded into Caligula is five shots, it takes three seconds to reload! I haven't looked at your back until now for naught!"》

What Mamoru said was right on target. Although Caligula had a tremendous destructive power, the magical bullets had to be filled directly into the cylinder manually with the user's fingers.

It was unavoidable. Delay between magical power's injection and firing was too long.

Knowing that——Hayato had swung his right arm.

《"?!"》

It can't be, Mamoru was horrified.

Exactly, it was that "it can't be".

Hayato had swung his fist and hit the shell. Normally even with a Witch-Hunter form he wouldn't survive such a blow.

However, Hayato had opened the cylinder latch and performed a reload before resurfacing from the explosion's flame.

He was intact. Heliogabalus' destructive power was comparable to that of Caligula, it was neutralized just by being punched.

There were only 10 meters remaining until landing. Hayato's muzzle had captured Mamoru.

《"UUUOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"》

While raising a cry, Mamoru had fired a shell at Hayato from nearly zero distance.

At the same time Hayato fired Caligula's magical bullet.

The two's power had collided again.

They weren't evenly matched. This time Hayato's magic had penetrated through Mamoru's shell and hit him directly.

As soon as it landed, shockwave had mowed everything down. The tiles on fountain square were peeled off and even the ground had deformed.

Caligula's destructive power was legendary. Just like Mamoru said, it was a Relic Eater specializing in destructive power and the Caligula's 'Tyrant' magical property just like 'Dragon' property held destructive force in the magical power itself.

The Relic Eater's intrinsic performance was a thing called 'Destructive power is dependent on the strength of contractor's life force". Along with the official name and numbering, just like Innocentius had "prototype" engraved, Caligula was had "test type" engraved in. It didn't have an anti-magic performance like other Relic Eaters.

What Caligula sought was "strength". When Caligula had found a strong contractor that satisfied it, it had sucked their life as a price.

A person with Hayato's talent had born once per 100 years, a human mutation that had boasted of overly-high specs since birth, "Hero Vessel". It was proven by Inquisition's Seelies during examination that he was a "Hero Vessel".

"....."

After landing on the ground on his knees, Hayato stood up soundlessly.

In the smoke, he closed his eyes.

"...you're all talk."

Hayato had muttered with a sigh.

As if cutting through the space dense from smoke, it was then that something had attacked aiming for Hayato's head.

It was the enormous Dragoon fist. Heliogabalus and Mamoru.

《"OOOOOOOAAA!!"》

Mamoru's fist was received and stopped with a single hand of Hayato's.

The fist huge like a rock had been stopped with a single hand, not even faltering.

But Mamoru didn't stop. Undaunted he challenged Hayato in close combat.

All of Mamoru's attacks were lightly caught by Hayato, with a single hand.

"It's pointless."

He had entered the gap in the giant bulk and squeezed the trigger after poising the gun against its abdomen.

Caligula's bullet was emitted at zero distance, exploding at Dragoon's abdomen.

In response to the impact Mamoru bent and was about to fall.

《"Not yet!!"》

Blowing magical power from a booster, Mamoru had immediately used the Dragoon's fist to punch Hayato.

**bang*, a hook hit Hayato's head.

《 "If Caligula specializes in destruction, my Heliogabalus would be the one specializing in defense!"》

Defense. Heliogabalus' characteristic was just as he said, an outstanding anti-magical defense.

Heliogabalus' magical power property was "Dragon".

He was able to compete with "Tyrant" magical bullet because the shell had been built with "Dragon" property magical power. However, Heliogabalus' characteristic was defense. The substance boasting of the highest hardness and anti-magic resistance wasn't Blue Crystal nor Weiss Crystal, it was "Dragon's Scales". Heliogabalus' magical property was capable of reproducing the dragon's scales as armor.

The characteristics of another EXE member, Gou's Relic Eater "Ivan" was "being unaffected by magic" which meant things made with magic and magical bullets, it was awfully weak against physical attacks.

In Heliogabalus' case, it had boasted of "outstanding defense against everything". It was impossible to penetrate through the dragon's scales without Magical Heritage on the level of those from legends and held by legendary heroes.

If Caligula was the strongest spear, Heliogabalus was the strongest shield. Looking purely at combat capability, Heliogabalus' magic cannon had fired "Dragon" shells and was very high spec.

However, Hayato's specs as a contractor were overwhelming.

And Caligula had greedily responded to the contractor's specs.

No matter how much Mamoru had extruded the most out of Heliogabalus' performance, not even a fist that could destroy a building with a single blow could reach Hayato.

《"Why do you betray us when you have so much power?! Why do you forsake us?!"》

As Hayato had easily blocked an attack with one hand, Mamoru had raised a bitter cry.

Hayato did not answer. Since he had determined talking was pointless, he would definitely not respond.

《"!! Why——WHY ARE YOU LEAVING US BEHINDDDD!!"》

Mamoru pulled his arm back and swung it.

The forearm part of his right arm opened up like a flower and expanded a magical circle. The clenched fist was tinged with ultramarine magical power and started violently rotating.

It was intrinsic magic of Heliogabalus' that had concentrated the destructive power of the Dragon property to the limit, the 《Bahamut Enchantment》.

Hayato had furrowed his eyebrows in response to Mamoru's cry, then closed his eyes.

A memory of the past had revived in him.

The time when that man had left EXE, turning his back on him. The words he said to that man.

——Are you leaving us behind.

Burdened and alone, all the obsession, confusion and anger towards the man who shouldered everything alone and died.

Unexpectedly, Mamoru's words were the same he used when he spoke towards Mineshiro Kazuma.

Temporarily making Caligula vanish, Hayato swung his fist backwards in the same manner Mamoru did.

On the elbow part, three jet-black magical circles had appeared.

"《Tyrant Enchantment》"

His fist was clad in black lightning, pitch, endless blackness swirled around it.

《"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!"》

"———!!"

And the two's fists clad in extreme destruction have collided.

The nature of two magical powers specializing in destructive power was evenly matched.

However, the difference between the two was clear.

Hayato's fist had shattered Mamoru's fist, the arm itself had burst.

Crushed with a full body blow, Mamoru had staggered.

That's when Hayato had the enchant's magical power dissipate and stretched his fingertips forming a chop.

"Sorry, there's no time."

Pulling his elbow backwards, he had pierced through armor-clad Mamoru.

The armor whose hardness was equal to that of dragon's scales let out a high-pitched cracking sound.

With his right eye Mamoru had peeked out out the cockpit through the crack.

The two's gaze tinged with sadness had crossed each other and——Hayato had Caligula reappear.

"It's over."

The muzzle was aimed at the scales.

Seeing Mamoru close his eyes and prepare for death, Hayato,

"———"

Hayato had slightly shifted the muzzle's direction and fired a magical bullet.

The bullet hit and Heliogabalus' body had decomposed.

Heliogabalus had barely retained its original shape, it could no longer answer to Mamoru's will to fight and wobbled on its knees, backing away.

In the square, a dry wind had blown passing between the two.

The fight was over. The ending was too decisive not to call it settled.

".....I knew...that I can't win against you."

Hayato approached Mamoru and aimed his gun.

"Still, I...wanted to follow after your back...I wanted to catch up to you."

Facing downwards, Mamoru spoke in hoarse voice.

"Why did you...leave us behind...! Are we...that useless...?!"

Squeezed sad voice, words depending on someone.

Hayato had finally understood the feelings of his past self.

Mamoru was the same as Hayato's past self. He had admired Hayato.

In the same manner Hayato was envious of Kazuma. That he had a place that looked like his destination, Hayato too wanted to see it in the depths of his heart.

He wanted to keep chasing after that back forever, he thought.

After being taught about the law in his heart he was left. The feelings he had towards the man who had betrayed him was hatred, jealousy, sadness and made him sick.

That's why, Hayato had decided to at least convey his words to Mamoru

"Jougasaki, that's not it. I didn't think of you or Himemiya and others as useless."

"...then...why..."

Begging him, he looked up at Hayato.

Squinting, Hayato let out the emotions he was suppressing.

"I... never again want to..."

Never again I want to lose someone.

I don't want to regret.

Turning Ootori Sougetsu into your enemy, was turning the entire human race into your enemies. Involving himself in such a catastrophic rebellion he himself was enough.

After taking over EXE from Kazuma and leading it as the captain, before he noticed he found many things precious to him.

Even a man who clings to the law had made things he wants to protect.

The law he had defined didn't allow to involve even a single one person he held dear.

As he attempted to convey it, Hayato's throat shook.

I don't want you to lose, he said.

——These words didn't reach Mamoru.

"?! W-what...?!"

Suddenly, Mamoru let out a panicked voice.

Heliogabalus that should have been destroyed started moving.

Creaking body rose up and stood again.

"What's happening...?! Why does it move on it's own...?!"

Mamoru desperately tried to take control of Heliogabalus, but as if it was in autopilot it hadn't responded.

Hayato opened his eyes wide and instantly aimed the muzzle at Heliogabalus.

"——Jougasaki! Cancel Witch-Hunter form immediately!"

Along with an furious roar, Hayato put a finger on the trigger.

"C-can't cancel it...! It can't be, this..."

In panic, Mamoru looked at Hayato from the cockpit.

His eyes were asking for help.

"Jougasaki!"

Hayato instantly reached out, hoping he could make it in time.

However,

"Sen...pai... I————"

The moment Mamoru was to say something——the cockpits inner walls had squashed him.

Blood had splashed at Hayato's cheek, the outstretched hand had grasped nothing but air.

"....."

Hayato was stunned with eyes wide open.

Just when he thought he doesn't want to lose, he lost.

Too suddenly. Too abruptly.

Once again his mind filled with regret.

Despite losing its contractor, Heliogabalus moved making metallic sounds.

Heliogabalus' raised the gun barrel attached to the right arm and directed it at Hayato.

And, the ultramarine-colored eyes had glowed red.

《"——HAHAHA, HAHAHAHAHAHA, HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"》

Heliogabalus' low, laughing voice had echoed.

Hayato realized who was the owner of the laughing voice.

The tone of voice was different. Completely different.

Even so, Hayato knew. Who was manipulating it, he knew who had killed Mamoru.

——His anger had burst out.

Poising Caligula, with a furious expression he called that name.

"Ootori... Sougetsu...!!!"

Both muzzles had spouted fire at the same time.

* * *

Ouka and Mari combination had a very good balance of offense and defense. The two might not like each other, but when it came down to combat they were surprisingly familiar with each other's moves. Among the enemies they had encountered so far, they wasn't a single one they didn't beat down.

However, the fight against Himemiya was extremely fierce.

"HAAAAAaaaa!!"

Ouka soared and aiming at troublesome the missile pod, she fired 《Count's Fang》.

However, Iori avoided it with a slight move.

When 《Count's Fang》 was avoided, there was a big chance. At the same time Iori had avoided, she had kicked Ouka's belly.

Thanks to Mari activating 《Aurora Field》 on the brink of Ouka hitting the ground's surface, Ouka hadn't clashed into it.

Ouka held her belly with a hand and looked up at the sky in anguish.

"Nikaido! Now!"

When Ouka shouted, far above Iori hovering in the air, Mari deployed a huge magical circle.

As if to say she waited for it, Mari licked her lips.

"Mari-san's full power! 《Stardust Aurora》!"

Mari aimed the huge magical circle below and pulled her right arm back in order to release all magical power available to her. Then, with abandon she had hit the constructed magical circle with her arm, causing the huge magic burst out together with the magical circle's crumbling. The outburst had consisted of multiple overlapping 《Aurora Cannon》 magic.

As the magical circles were crushed before the operative procedure fixing the magic into rays was completed, the magic had been forced to activate.

As a result, numerous swirling 《Aurora Cannons》 had poured down in all directions.

"———!"

Iori has shown impatience and devoted herself to defense.

However, swallowed by a storm of auroral bullets each having a size of a car, her figure had become invisible.

The shells had landed and the ground was messed up as if a nuclear explosion hit it.

Seeing that scene, Mari put a hand on her hip and made a smug, arrogant expression.

"Fufufuunn! How was that, how? Even if you can predict my actions, you can't predict the trajectory even I can't predict, can you? It's magic I instantly made after seeing your missiles. Mari-chan's a genius after all〜."

Growing impudent, Mari laughed loudly with "Oh ho ho".

When she did, a shout could be heard from her intercom.

《"*cough*, *cough*...you!! Don't involve me in all that!"》

It was Ouka who was in the vicinity of the ground.

Speaking of which, you're right. Mari stared wide eyed.

She hit the palm of her hand with a fist.

"I believeth that Ouka will avoid it!"

The intonation of "believe" was strange.

Ouka soared through the smoke at breakneck speed and delivered a chop to Mari's head.

"You just thought of that now, right?! You just made up that excuse, right?!"

"Ow, that hurt! Even hit by them you wouldn't die! Rather, it's your fault for relaxing yourself in 《Aurora Field》's bed down there!"

Because the chop was too serious, Mari had refuted with watery eyes.

"Still, who the hell would mercilessly bomb people like that! I really thought I'd die!"

"I saiddd, my magic has lethality suppressed and won't kill someone who's in Witch Hunter form! Did you forget my "Non-Killing Witch" nickname?!"

"Hell-if-I-know! Who cares about nicknames! I have one and I don't go around boasting about it!"

"It's fine to boast! I don't care! Also, your nickname is disgraceful! It's Calamity (lol)! What "Calamity", mine's cooler!"

"I-I didn't give it to myself! Y-your magic name is lame too!"

"L-lame...?! I-it can't be helped, right?! Since Aurora magic doesn't have official name I named it on my own! It's not lame!"

Ouka and Mari started to quarrel like a cat fight.

Even if their moves matched, the two were same as ever.

".....I'm being underestimated here. Non-Killing? With such way of thinking do you think you can beat me?"

The two looked towards the voice at the same time.

They saw Iori slowly raise from the ground.

"N-no way... while lethality is low, Aurora property deals damage directly to the soul... why..."

Speechless, Mari confronted Iori.

Once again entering battle readiness Ouka made a stance.

"If you consider she avoided them all, she'll be fine."

"Exactly. Let me say, Daji doesn't read thoughts of the enemy. It reads the flow of magical power... I told you, as long as you rely on magical power it won't work on me."

With a cool expression Iori put a hand on her cheek.

"In a place like this with a lot of magical power in the air, even if you didn't have any magical power in your bodies I could understand everything as long as you exert force."

She rotated the machine gun on her shoulder.

"My weaknesses are decisive instead. Well, in exchange for that I can suppress my power consumption and continue battling almost forever."

"....."

"If you want to fight me, come with intent to kill. If you don't want to kill me, surrender. The only choices left to you are those two."

Despite her frosty expression, the machine guns on her shoulders heated up.

Ouka heaved a deep sigh and lowered Vlad.

"It can't be helped... Nikaido, relax your stance."

"Wh-why?!"

"It's fine, do as I say."

Mari was surprised, but she bit her lower lip and had the magical circles disappear.

You don't really intend to surrender like this, do you? If you are, I'll beat you up and then bash your character in shape, Mari thought.

With a cold expression, Iori laughed faintly. At the same time she stopped the machine gun's rotation.

"That's wise. Unlike in the past, you've become obedient, Ouka-san."

"No. I'm sorry, but I have no intention to surrender. I just want to ask one question."

Scratching her ear with a finger, Ouka said in a loud voice.

Once again, Iori's expression had turned cold.

"...what is it. Ask one thing you want then. It's pointless to make any strange moves, you know?"

"I have no intention to do so. Vlad said that Daji has sensing range of 2000 meters. Is such vast range of searching really possible...?"

Iori was puzzled, but she shrugged.

"Here I wondered what... even if that's true, what of it?"

"I thought it's amazing."

Sighing, Iori had the machine gun rotate again.

"Thanks for that. Really. Are your silly questions over? You're not going to surrender are you? Is it fine now?"

"Yes. Thank you very much as well.

——There you have it, Saionji."

With Usagi's name suddenly appear, Iori furrowed her eyebrows.

Mari too, wondered what she suddenly started talking about.

Was she buying time by asking a stupid question? Iori started the booster on her back——and was horrified when a certain possibility had entered her head.

"......————————It can't be...!"

Iori tried to look behind her, that moment.

——**gvooon**

"Kh-aa——!"

Something had hit her shoulder at a tremendous speed. Her shoulder armor was blown off and the machine gun stopped functioning, scattering sparks.

Daji had instantly provided an analysis on the object that had hit her shoulder.

WC bullet. A brutal projectile that could even destroy a Relic Eater's armor. Daji's own armor was very weak. After getting hit by that, there was no way it wouldn't have its armaments blown off.

When it comes to anti-magic bullets, there wasn't a single person who could take it.

Holding her shoulder down, Iori stared into the distance.

She couldn't see. Even with the information from Daji's sensing, she couldn't see.

It was natural.

Saionji Usagi——wasn't at such close distance.

"No way, that girl is aiming from outside the sensing range?!"

Immediately after her bewildered mutter, this time the bullet had hit Iori's right leg.

"——I never let a prey I have in my sights escape."

On a rooftop of a slightly elevated building.

With a bandaged head Saionji Usagi was on one knee, holding the rifle with both arms and firmly captured the target in her sights.

"Nice shot, as expected of our Usagi-chan〜."

Standing next to her was Ikaruga, who with binoculars was checking if the bullets hit and reported in her usual languid voice.

When Ikaruga checked the distance measurement on the binoculars, the distance between them and the objective was 2900 meters.

2900 meters.

It was slightly beating the world record in sniping for this era.

"Without this gun, it would be an impossible distance."

"It's a good thing I made it possible to use gunpowder for times like this."

"Yes. I am more used to this——and above all, this scent after shooting is something I very much like."

Staring through the scope Usagi sharply narrowed her eyes, another gunshot had sounded.

Usagi, what a dreadful girl you are! Ikaruga beside her was trembling, but what she said didn't reach Usagi's ears.

The second shot also hit the target thanks to the fact Usagi had learned Iori's habits from observing her battle with Ouka and Mari.

She had predicted Iori would stagger after the first shot and to immediately fire the second one.

It was because since firing until the impact there was a five second lag.

"Ootori, Nikaido, attack her as to seal as many movement patterns of hers as possible. I shall finish her off."

《"Roger!"》

《"Roooger〜!"》

The two's high-spirited response lit a fire under Usagi's calm fighting spirit.

She knew the gun's habits in full now. Fortunately, the wind has ceased to blow, weather was practically windless.

If there was a problem, it would be how the rifle sat in her arms. It would be easy if she could expand a bipod, but then she couldn't cope with it if enemy raised higher. Usagi was incredibly strong for a normal woman, but it was inevitable that her arms would grow numb.

But, she had no intention of complaining nor crying in pain.

Despite all, Usagi was the 35th Test Platoon's sniper. She had survived so far with just sniping. This was the only thing for her and the skill she continued to polish.

Usagi too, had her pride. Her fright and pride had no relation. If anything, her pride being hurt had blown away all the tension.

That woman, with the same sniping had hurt Usagi's pride. She couldn't forgive her.

She needed to pay a high price for that.

"Now, let's have the unnecessary things you are clad in——all stripped off you."

Saionji Usagi had declared with an incredibly cold voice.

"Khh...!"

Having her leg and shoulder hit, Iori was flying at high speed using her boosters.

Himemiya Iori didn't think there was a sniper this outstanding in the 35th platoon.

She wasn't conceited. Iori who was good at analyzing information continued to refine this advantage of hers after Daji had contracted with her.

Processing the information passed to her by Daji wasn't a task possible for someone having a normal information processing capability. Precision and computing power similar to that of a computer was required.

She had covered her own missing abilities with information, in order to cover everything.

That was her only saving grace.

Above all, she was able to expand her own strength this far thanks to the fact that she, a dropout, was praised by that person.

Having her only advantage sealed, Iori was upset.

Enemy should be in high spot! In that case I'll proceed in the shadow of the building flying very low until I approach the sniper and capture her within my sensing range! The priority is defeating the sniper!

Wavering, Iori had left Ouka and Mari, descending.

She flew between convoluted buildings in order to find the sniper.

But——

"《Stardust Aurora》!"

Fierce bombing had assaulted her from the sky. Randomly pouring down rainbow-colored shells had destroyed all the buildings she could hide behind in a wide range.

Seeing the enormous destructive power and absurd amount of magical power, Iori was horrified.

As far as she could see, nearly all the buildings have turned into rubble.

"As if I'd let you hide!"

Continuing to destroy the buildings Mari dropped down below Iori, then started to fire a meteor shower from below.

It's impossible to take them down with missiles' power... in this case I have no choice but to avoid raising up until I reach the atmosphere! If I somehow leave the range of the sniper's range I'll be able to avoid everything!

"I won't let you——《Tepes Rain》！"

The moment she moved up with a booster, a voice had come from directly above her.

When she raised her face upwards, she saw Ouka's figure raising both her handguns towards the sky.

On the sky's entirety was drawn crimson magical circle.

And what had rained down, was an enormous amount of huge stakes.

Iori was speechless. Both above and under there was hell. Her escape route was cut off. Although it was possible to avoid it, the problem wasn't Ouka or Mari's magic.

She could read it. She couldn't read from where and how the sniper would shoot her.

Relying on the information too much had become her foe.

If she's targeted in the meanwhile, she might be shot down in worst case.

In that case she had no choice but to give up on avoiding the barrage and had to shoot everything down!

"I'm... EXE...!"

She couldn't lose here. The EXE's pride was on the line.

Spreading mechanical wings, she expanded pale magical circles on their surface. She had used all the weapons she had left to their fullest.

Interception lasers in the wings, one missile pod on her leg and a machine gun.

Intrinsic magic 《Full Burst》. An omnidirectional interception magic of Daji's "Beguile" magical property.

"TAKE ALL PROJECTILES DOWNNNNNNN!!"

As she appealed the sparks have been spread all around. Daji had granted her information and she had locked on all the targets. Starting the interception.

Ouka and Mari didn't lose and continued to maintain the rapid fire, but not a single shot had reached her.

To Iori, not having any information on the single blow of Saionji was the problem.

However, it was impossible for it to circumvent this barrage.

She can try to hit her in this situation if she wants to.

I'll shot down any attack there is.

"——?!"

In that instant, Iori had certainly caught it in her sight.

Between the rain of stakes and the meteor rain of shells, slipping through Iori's desperate interception, a white bullet had approached directly at her——

Impossible.

The bullet had slipped through everything and directly hit Iori's machine gun, destroying it.

This.

The following bullet fired in rapid succession had destroyed her remaining missile pod.

Isn't a human... skill.

And in the end, two bullets fired in rapid succession had pulverized her two mechanical wings.

The wreckage had returned back to magical particles, melting into the air.

With the string of magical pulled, Iori's body fell down.

In the middle of the fall, Iori looked back at her past. Before she realized, she thought of back when she was a student. She was shy and withdrawn back when she had entered the 35th Test Platoon, every day she had desperately earned points together with her comrades. When she was in her second year, they lost three comrades because of her mistake and a serious injury was inflicted to Mamoru. She recalled Hayato rushing to their help as a member of EXE.

Her life had began back then.

Since then, she had desperately chased after Hayato's and Mamoru's back.

Yes...we just chased after his back...we didn't care about how to be an...inquisitor..."

Like that, Iori had reached the ground.

Despite being given power as part of EXE she had lost to her juniors and lost her wings, thinking she had no right to live, she closed her eyes.

She was strongly grabbed with an arm.

When she opened her eyes, she saw Ouka's figure spreading her wings, holding her arm.

"Ouka-san... why did you save me?"

"I didn't intend to kill Senpai right from the start."

"...I'm your enemy... if it was you from before, you would kill me mercilessly."

Ouka made a slightly vexed expression.

"Even myself from before wouldn't kill Senpai who was my former colleague..."

"....."

"If I did that, I would go against the law that had settled inside of me."

Saying so, Ouka slowly let Iori down on the ground.

Accidentally, Ouka said the same thing Hayato did.

Having law inside of myself. Iori didn't understand the meaning of these words. The difficulty of their work was to ruthlessly catch criminals, emphasizing just the law as an inquisitor.

To think that a girlie like this understood Hayato's teaching faster than she did.

"What are you saying. Just a while ago all you said was 'revenge revenge'〜."

Mari who had landed beside Ouka using flight rings pursed her lips.

"〜〜!! I... it's fine. I've put an end to that already."

"Even she, just recently had begun to strive as not to kill anyone〜."

"Shut up there. You be silent as well."

As the two had started to quarrel again, Iori raised her face.

It was as if she was looking at past Mamoru and herself.

The 35th Test Platoon. A special platoon that had collected strange people... just like back when Iori was in it.

In this nostalgic mood, a smile had naturally spilled on her face.

It was a complete defeat. These girls were one step ahead of her. Overtaken by her juniors, she lost her position as the one was first. Catching these children was no longer possible for her.

Thinking so, Iori had released her strength.

It was then, that she felt a pain inside of her chest.

".....eh?"

Along with her confused voice, blood had spilled out of her mouth.

When she moved her line of sight to her chest, she saw a pale yellow piece of armor pierce it.

"Da...ji...?"

It was left behind not turning back to particles, a piece of Daji's wing.

"...Himemiya-senpai!"

Ouka and Mari noticed it too, rushing to Himemiya. Blood had flowed endlessly, dyeing the ground red.

Ouka had embraced Himemiya.

"What's happening...?! Why is a Relic Eater...?!"

"......gh...uu....."

Iori didn't know either.

The only thing she knew, was that she'll die very soon. She had organized everything in her head by the priority. Organized the information. Before she was interrupted she had to relay what was most important.

The one who rules over Relic Eaters is Ootori Sougetsu. Hayato was right. Chairman had ordered them to chase after him, desperately wanting to conceal what is in the document.

Thinking of relaying that, Iori.

Iori's heart, had cried that wasn't it.

The words she wanted to relay was not information.

It was her feelings.

"T-tell...tel-l...Hayato...-senpai...that.....person..."

Squeezing out the last of her strength, she put her bloodied hand on Ouka's shoulder.

And shedding tears from her eyes, she said.

"N-not...to leave me.....let me be...in.....EXE forever..."

"....nh."

"For being beside...you...forgive me.....tell...him that..."

Hearing Iori's request, Ouka nodded with a bitter expression.

She felt all the strength leave Iori's body.

Ouka had lowered the hand on her shoulder, Iori's vision was shrouded in darkness.

Unexpectedly, there was no regret. No sadness.

Just a little bit of satisfaction echoed in the back of her chest.

But as if she was tired, the curtain of her life closed.

Looking down at dead Iori, Ouka had put her on the ground.

After closing her open eyes, she stood up.

"...why, did such a thing..."

Holding her mouth, Mari muttered unable to accept this situation.

Ouka clenched her fist in front of Iori and grit her teeth.

"It's Chairman... that man has control over the Relic Eaters in his grasp."

"...but, why?"

"Just now, Jougasaki-senpai had the document. Jougasaki-senpai must have read it. Since he wants to hide his identity, that man killed his subordinates."

Ootori Sougetsu is that kind of a man. Ouka experienced it before. On the day Takeru had contracted Mistilteinn, Vlad disappeared in middle of the battle with the Einherjar. The moment Ouka was convinced of enemy's defeat, she was deprived of the Relic Eater and unable to do anything.

"Am I right? Vlad."

《"..... yeah, it's King's doing. King hath control ov'r us. If not for coating like ours, Relic Eaters cannot go against his orders. That's how we wast made."》

Hearing indifferent and dignified voice of Vlad, Ouka turned around on her heel.

Mari timidly stretched her hand out.

"W-wait a second, are we... leaving this person?"

"...it can't be helped. There isn't time, soon this place will be swallowed up by Sanctuary."

With Vlad in both her hands, Ouka scowled.

"Takeru is in danger."

If Sougetsu wanted to conceal the document, life of everyone in here was in danger.

The Glossary

Bahamut Enchantment (バハムート・エンチャント) - It's written as "Dragon Ruler's Enchant" (覇竜の付与) and read as "Bahamut Enchantment".

Stardust Aurora (スターダスト・アウローラ) - It's written as "Auroral Meteor Shower" (極光流星群) and read as "Stardust Aurora".

Chapter 6 - My Law Won't be Shaken

After hearing sounds of battle, Takeru had finally reached the fountain square.

Out of breath, Takeru put his hand on his knees.

Holding Lapis prepared he had looked into the rubble's shade in the fountain square.

At a glance, it could be seen that a large-scaled battle had taken place there.

Takeru walked on the rippled ground, approaching the square that was the battlefield's center. In there, was just one person.

The man who looked up straight at the sky, Kurogane Hayato.

Beside him lied a destroyed Dragoon. The Dragoon's wreckage shone slightly tinged with magical power before it eventually had faded away becoming particles.

Remaining in the location of the disappeared Dragoon, lied Jougasaki Mamoru's corpse had become ugly, distorted and bloodied.

The corpse was covered from the top with Hayato's coat.

Takeru didn't think Hayato would kill Mamoru.

At the very least, Kurogane Hayato wasn't a person who would kill a comrade.

"....."

Clenching the document with one hand, Hayato just continued to look at the sky.

Takeru stopped to hide and walked towards him.

"...Kusanagi Takeru, why do you fight."

Being questioned, Takeru answered without stopping to walk.

"For my little sister. For my comrades. And for myself."

"...for your comrades? There should no longer be any need for your comrades to fight."

His voice was low, there was no intonation.

What Hayato said was correct. But Takeru dared to deny it.

"To them, I am a comrade. They believe in me and try to save me. I don't want to betray those feelings."

"....."

"If I'm not saved, my comrades won't be saved. And above all, if the world isn't saved, everything won't be saved. That's why——I will believe in myself and fight."

Takeru stopped his feet and stood a little bit away from Hayato.

"One for all, all for one huh. It's a self-centered idea. For me, if I can save everyone at expanse of just myself, I choose that as the captain."

Hearing those words Takeru felt they had a meaning of "I'll sacrifice myself to protect everyone".

"But isn't it selfish to sacrifice yourself?"

"....."

"I don't know what you burdened yourself with all alone, but you had comrades. They desperately wanted to convince you and to know what were you trying to do. Your ego is the reason why you haven't told them about it."

"....."

"I will no longer burden myself all alone. Unlike you."

Hearing Takeru's words, Hayato lowered his head and turned towards him.

"So that's why you turn Ootori Sougetsu into your enemy. You involve your comrades and turn the world into your enemy."

"I just want stop him from using my little sister. But, if that person's final goal is to destroy the world, I'll stop him."

"Will you kill him?"

"If necessary, I'm willing to."

An instant answer. He didn't have a speck of hesitation when it came to killing that man.

He had no intention of forgiving what has been done to his little sister and comrades. But if that man had a reason to perpetrate all that, Takeru wanted to know it.

Whether he kills him or not can be decided afterwards.

"——In that case, I need to stop you at all costs."

Hayato pulled the jet-black revolver, Caligula.

And one more, he pulled out the silver revolver on the low holster on his waist, performed a gunspin and aimed it at Takeru.

Takeru furrowed his eyebrows.

"Why? There should be no meaning in us fighting each other. Since you have betrayed and chased after this document, Kurogane-san also considers Chairman as your enemy, right?"

"Yeah. *But, I changed my mind after reading this document*. I can no longer allow you kill to Ootori Sougetsu."

"....."

"I will judge that man in a method other than killing. Don't put a hand on him."

Saying so indifferently, Hayato raised silver revolver's hammer.

Takeru held the sword forward and asked.

"...what is written in that document?"

"I cannot tell you that. If you want to know, you have no other way but to take it from me."

Wind had blown between the two.

It seemed like there was no other way but to fight for the two who had taken a different path while aiming for the same place.

"I don't want to fight you. You have saved us."

"I'm acting in accordance to my own law. I had until now and will in the future."

"Can't we cooperate here...?"

"*As long as you are contracted to Mistilteinn*, it's impossible. In accordance to my law, I will stop you here."

Somewhere in his heart, Takeru thought that this will happen.

Ever since he had come back from Magic Academy and had declared in front of him that they will join Heretic Alliance, he thought so. He couldn't bring himself to aim the blade at the man who had saved them twice.

However, Takeru couldn't yield in here.

Takeru raised his sword and resolved himself.

"If you stand in my way, I'll defeat you!"

Hayato standing against him set up Caligula in his right hand and spoke quietly.

"I will not acknowledge your law."

An azure-colored magical circle had appeared beneath Takeru's feet.

A jet-black and silver magical circles had rotated violently under Hayato's feet.

And——

" "Summis desiderantes affectibus——" "

The two captains had glared at each other, clashing.

" "——Malleus Maleficarum!" "

Before the armor had wrapped around their bodies, the two kicked off the ground.

Takeru had lowered his upper body to the limit and headed for Hayato with the sword in his sheath.

On the other hand Hayato had aimed Caligula's muzzle at Takeru and rushed to him at full speed.

The two's bodies were wrapped around in the armor on the verge of their clash.

Takeru thought Kurogane Hayato was strong. He could see it at a glance. Most likely his strength was on the level equal to that of his master, Orochi.

That was why it wasn't a good idea to prolong it nor hold back.

There was no other chance than to hit him with all he had right from the start——

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——Heavenly Evil Spirit!"

He instantaneously invoked Soumatou to the limit and using sword drawing technique's repulsive force he released a high speed slash.

It was Takeru's maximum speed. An attack that had surpassed the speed of sound.

——However, that slash had been repelled with a single magical bullet of Caligula's fired by Hayato.

"!"

Having his sword blown away strongly, Takeru bent backwards.

He was surprised to lose in power, but what was even more astonishing was the fact Hayato could fire at the blade moving that fast.

The shockwave had raised Takeru's hair and raised the dust up.

《"For Caligula to be this powerful...!"》

"Khh!"

Takeru utilized the recoil and with his bent posture he was about to take another step forward.

However, before he could do it, Hayato closed the distance between them.

"?!"

"Too slow."

Hayato kicked. Even though Takeru knew that, he couldn't see that attack at all.

Soundless. It was so fast there wasn't even any sound of cutting through the wind.

A single blow hammered into him had broke Takeru's body into a 〈 shape.

A sound like an earth's tremor had rang out, followed by a sound like that of a thunder.

He couldn't believe it.

Hayato's kick alone had speed equivalent to that of Takeru's Heavenly Evil Spirit.

Although it seemed like he would be blown away, he had stood firm and with the leg still on his belly, he had pushed forward.

"RRRRrrraaaaaaa!!"

It wasn't the time to care about the stances. He just recklessly swung his sword to deliver an attack to the opponent.

"Give up."

Still maintaining the posture he used for the kick, Hayato fired a magical bullet. The bullet once again hit the blade directly.

This time Takeru was unable to withstand the recoil and his shoulder was disconnected.

"——Aghh!"

The arm disconnected from the shoulder had fluttered from the impact like a flag fueled on the wind.

《"Host!"》

The moment he heard Lapis' scream, Takeru's face that made an anguished expression was grasped by Hayato's hand.

Hayato removed his leg from Takeru's belly and this time bent his knee.

And he slammed Takeru's head onto his knee.

The impact had penetrated to the brain. Although the skull wasn't cracked, the damage was more than serious.

Takeru shown the whites of his eyes and his consciousness faded.

And then, furthermore——Hayato had aimed at Takeru's chest from zero distance.

《"!!"》

With Takeru losing consciousness, Lapis moved independently. She had made the armor thicker at the place of impact and in addition to that, she had ejected magic from the gaps in the armor on the chest.

——**dogunn**

The ejected magic had struck Hayato's body, making him momentarily let go of Takeru's head.

Hayato fired a Magical Bullet at Takeru who was escaping by ejecting magic.

Lapis had adjusted the magic ejection to change traveling direction, moving in a zig-zag which spared Takeru getting a direct hit.

The magical power ejection had blown Takeru's body away backwards and he rammed into the debris.

After having his back hit the rubble, Takeru woke up.

"? ...damnn, my consciousness... I lost it, huh..."

Shaking his head, he stood up weakly.

《"Host... it's unfortunate, but the opponent is clearly better. It can be said that even in close quarters combat we're at disadvantage."》

While relocating his shoulder, Takeru listened to what Lapis said.

At disadvantage in close combat. He didn't want to admit it, but that's how it was.

In such a short amount of time he had realized how skilled Hayato was.

Involuntarily he was reminded of the everyday training with Orochi. The difference between their strength was clear.

He was so strong Takeru felt like laughing. It has been a while since he had fought someone far beyond him.

At times like these, there was no way he could win unless he used his head a little.

《"Host, I have absorbed a lot of magical power in the battles so far. In current state I have the excess magical power absorbed so far by God Hunter form."》

"...what should we do?"

《"The amount of ammo that can be loaded into Caligula has a maximum of five. In other words, there are two bullets remaining inside. Because of its characteristics, Caligula cannot be reloaded until it exhausts all the bullets. In other words, if we do something about remaining two rounds, he will have to reload."》

That's when there'll be an opening, is what Lapis meant.

That was the reason why Hayato fought in close combat and suppressed the magical bullet usage.

《"However, if we approach from this distance the opponent will most likely finish reloading."》

In other words, if he approaches the opening will disappear.

There was a need to finish him off from this distance.

That's when Lapis autonomously expanded a magical circle and had wrapped Takeru's body with a magical film.

《"Let yourself get shot. I will surely protect you from the remaining two shots with the stored magical power. After protecting you I'll turn the blade huge, please defeat Kurogane Hayato with it. I'll also use the remaining magical power for enchanting it."》

Slowly walking, Hayato had aimed the muzzle towards them.

Takeru resolved himself, believing in Lapis.

"——Let's do it, Lapis!"

He took a posture raising his sword high and gathered his strength to the limit.

"...I see. You thought it through. Protecting yourself from magical bullets with magic, forcing a reload."

Hayato had completely read their thoughts.

However, he had played along with it.

"In that case——let me pay my condolences."

Immediately after speaking contemptuously,

"I'm serious, take it on."

Hayato put a finger on the trigger and fired the magical bullet.

A black lightning had burst out.

It's size was completely different from the one fired earlier.

"W-what's with this size...UOOHH?!!"

Immediately after Takeru let out a surprised voice, the huge, jet-black magical bullet had landed on the protective magic.

Scraping the ground, the bullet surged on him.

《"Hhh...! Kh...uu... so he was holding back...until now...?!"》

Raising a surprised voice, Lapis maintained protective magic.

Protective magic wasn't a strong point of Lapis. To begin with, Relic Eaters are mostly unable to use any other magic than their intrinsic magic.

And that's why right now Lapis had supplemented it by using a high amount of magical power she had absorbed so far. Rather than using a carefully built operative procedure the protection magic used a high amount of magical power to effectively ensure its strength and endurance.

However, the protective magic Lapis could use was very basic. It had continued to rapidly consume magical power.

The bullet didn't disappear, it had continued to bite into the protective magic endlessly.

It wasn't magic, it was just a magical bullet.

It was just a mass of magical power with this much power.

Even Lapis' enchant would be unable to absorb it.

《"Consumption is higher than...at this rate...!"》

"Do your best Lapis... a little bit more!"

《"!!...the magical power for bearing next bullet is...!"》

"I'll somehow manage to avoid it!"

《"If magical power of this mass explodes we'll be involved in the impact anyway..!"》

Lapis said that it was impossible to avoid a magical bullet of this magnitude.

Then what should he do? What should he do about the opponent's attack?

After continued blocking the magical bullet had finally disappeared, it seemed impossible to maintain protective magic for any longer.

There was one more bullet remaining.

"It's over."

About to fire another bullet, Hayato squinted.

That's when——

"OOOORRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Suddenly, a green shadow had descended, aiming for Hayato.

Takeru changed his desperate expression and cried out towards the shadow falling from the sky.

"Kyouya?!!"

In order to respond to the surprise attack, with eyes wide open Hayato had pointed his muzzle at the attacker in the sky, then fired a huge magical bullet.

"——As if it'd hit!"

Kyouya had avoided the attack at the last moment by ejecting magical power.

Hayato's bullet had ascended far into the sky and caused a large explosion in there.

Because there was a large distance between them, the explosion didn't reach Kyouya.

"Kusanagi! Match me!"

Hearing Kyouya's shout, Takeru released his own strength.

"Lapis! *Put it on.*"

《"Understood. 'Twilight Enchantment', enchantment reversal, flexible material release."》

The sword held by Takeru had been morphed into a 50 meters long zweihander and shone, tinged with azure-colored magic. The surrounding air had changed completely and a storm of magical power had swept down from the blade.

He attacked just one moment after Kyouya.

Hayato could either take on Kyouya's attack or avoid it. In this situation he couldn't afford to reload. In other words Hayato was defenseless the moment he avoided or intercepted. That's where Takeru aimed.

——I definitely won't miss!

To cut down with everything he had!

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style——"

He had clenched the handle of zweihander as if trying to break it.

"DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRAAAAAAAAAA!!'

At the same time, Kyouya's blow assaulted Hayato. Adding falling speed and ejecting magic from behind, rotating, Kyouya had delivered a blow with a tonfa.

Hayato raised one hand upwards——and caught it.

In the middle of the shockwave, Kyouya pushed forward using the magic booster.

Hayato's strong arm didn't budge at all.

"————"

On the contrary, while holding Kyouya's fist Hayato aimed the silver gun in his hand at Takeru.

But it was already too late.

Takeru didn't stop. Not missing this opportunity, he attacked using his entire body.

The accumulated strength was released now.

"——Yamata no Orochi!"

A series of eight attacks at super high speed.

At Soumatou's maximum speed, the six slashes surpassing speed of sound——

"I told you to give up."

Hayato's voice didn't reach Takeru.

And yet, chills ran down his entire body.

Something is coming. Hayato's calm and collected expression, the silver muzzle, all of it told Takeru of this truth.

But he didn't stop. Yamata no Orochi released at maximum speed couldn't be stopped.

He had no choice but to blast it before Hayato fires!

Increasing the speed he swung it all at once.

However——soundlessly, the bullet was fired.

Silver-colored and pea-sized light.

It directly hit the zweihander Takeru held.

barin——

A sound similar to glass cracking had echoed.

He had no idea what happened.

Takeru just stood there, stunned.

He stood there, that was all.

".....eh.....?"

The sword he was about to swing down had returned to its original shape of a Japanese sword.

The blade releasing magical power had returned back to normal state as well.

"What...happened...?"

He had no clue.

The moment the silver bullet shot by Hayato touched them, everything had become as if the attack didn't happen in the first place.

The attack was cancelled? Reset?

What remained was a fog around him, just the diffused silver particles.

《"Impossible... all the magical power I built up... was diffused?"》

This phenomenon was named a diffusion by Lapis.

He had no idea. Just what did Hayato do?

Grasping Kyouya's fist, Hayato had flung him with abandon towards Takeru.

Bouncing on the ground, Kyouya rolled next to Takeru.

"Shitt! What, just what happened?!"

"....."

"What the hell you doin' Kusanagi?! Why didn't you attack!"

Kyouya raised his body and angrily questioned him.

Despite being asked that, Takeru couldn't explain what he didn't understand.

Hayato pulled the silver gun back and opened the smoking cylinder.

"...Maximilian's intrinsic performance is to enchant its magical bullets allowing it to diffuse all attack energy. Magic, magical power, physical force, all energy is instantly converted into magical power and diffused into the air."

What Hayato said, meant that the silver particles floating around them was the energy itself spread by Maximilian.

He loaded a bullet into the cylinder and pulled the hammer back.

"It was used only three times before. It is no wonder Mistilteinn doesn't know of it."

Slowly, once again Hayato turned Maximilian's muzzle at Takeru.

"Maximilian's power is not just spreading."

"——?!"

"It can condense the diffused energy——and to detonate it in any point."

Hayato soundly pulled the trigger to the limit.

In an instant the particles scattered around them have begun to converge right in front of Takeru.

Small silver particles continued to concentrate at one point.

Beautiful, even though what he could see was just a small light, for some reason that light looked to him more brutal than anything in this world——

"Kyouya! Run!"

Takeru desperately shouted.

"Kusanagi."

Hearing Kyouya's voice who was right beside, Takeru turned to look at him.

Kyouya aimed Nero's muzzle——right at Takeru.

"I'm paying you back."

Without even looking at him, Kyouya fired a shell from Nero.

Takeru was blown away and had slammed into a building a few hundred meters away.

"Ow...w...!"

He knew it the moment he was shot.

He received no damage. That shell just blew him away. Raising his upper body Takeru looked at Kyouya.

Stared at the appearance of Kyouya who kicked off the ground at his full speed to get away from the condensed light.

"Kyo——"

At the same time Takeru tried to shout his name, the world has been shrouded in silence for just a moment and his vision was stained with white light.

What had come afterwards was just a roar and impact.

* * *

Ten minutes before the explosion.

Sougetsu spread a sheet inside of the Chairman's room and practiced with a golf putter.

《"Currently, Kurogane Hayato and Kusanagi Takeru are in combat. Kurogane is overwhelming but... what should we do?"》

Holding a handset between his shoulder and cheek, Sougetsu listened to the report of the detached force.

"I don't think Kurogane-kun will kill Kusanagi-kun, but assist Kusanagi-kun if it looks really bad."

《"Un-understood... but, um..."》

"What? You're not going to say he's already dead are you?"

When Sougetsu asked with a slightly cramped smile, the subordinate responded with "he's alive".

《"It's just... I wondered... if we're cable of assisting him. Honestly, whether we're able to deliver any damage to Kurogane Hayato is..."》

Hearing that, Sougetsu smiled wryly and responded with "don't worry".

"You have been assigned Guillotines, haven't you. There's no need to worry as long as you have them."

《"U-understood."》

"The future of EXE depends on you, I have high expectations."

After the call finished Sougetsu flung the receiver towards the sofa. Pulling himself together he returned to practicing with putter.

"As if I'd expect anything of them...woops."

Holding the handle, Sougetsu gently hit the ball.

The ball rolled on the green sheet, then with its momentum it had reached the hole, but did not enter it.

"Grrrr.", he loudly growled and **bam**! He hit the floor with the sole of his foot.

The ball had entered the cup soundly, Sougetsu made a gut's pose with a loud 'YES!".

And then,

"...what do you want?"

With a watery sound, red meat had overflowed from the floor. Kiseki had emerged from its center.

"——Woahh?! Y-y...you surprised me. D-do something about the way you appear, it's bad for my heart."

"I don't care. What do you want?"

When Kiseki said so disinterested, Sougetsu put the putter on his shoulder with a smile.

"Actually, there's something I want your help with. Kurogane-kun... you know, the inquisitor who had caught you at first, do you remember him?"

"I don't."

"I see. Well, that absurdly powerful person seems to be fighting your Onii-chan now. And, while it's always like that for your Onii-chan, he seems quite outmatched. He might actually die."

Hearing it, Hyakki Yakou at Kiseki's feet had bristled.

It must be because she heard her brother is in danger and felt like going there.

I will be the one to kill Onii-chan.

She didn't say it, but her eyes complained so.

"Ah, wait wait. Going there directly is NG. You can't."

"Shut up. Don't order me around. Kiseki is going to save Onii-chan."

"You won't make it in time if you go there directly. Calm down, the mass-produced Relic Eaters that were sent to the detached force have your cells embedded. It should be enough to awaken those. After all, you can manipulate the cells."

Kiseki stared at Sougetsu with the embedded eyes, he stood up with a grin, raising his index finger.

"See? It's good to have me as your ally, right? And here your Onii-chan was nearly killed."

She fell silent for a while and after a moment, she closed her eyes.

Instead, a number of eyes had appeared on the Hyakki Yakou below his feet and wriggled around.

It must have been sensing for the whereabouts of the cells inside mass-produced Relic Eaters.

Sougetsu nodded satisfied and returned to practicing golf.

* * *

A cloud of dust had rose up from the rubble, Takeru had forced his body to crawl out from below.

"Khh....."

《"Host, are you injured?!"》

"I'm... fine. I can still move somehow."

Although the damage he received from the explosion was minor, the damage he received to his abdomen at first was very large. If not for Lapis' body strengthening, he would have burst into smithereens.

"...Lapis, can you find Kyouya's response?"

《"There is a biological response. Southwest, right around the corner."》

When Takeru turned around towards southwest, he saw a hand protrude from the debris.

He immediately rushed in and pulled Kyouya from below the rubble.

"You okay...?!"

"...uhh..."

Kyouya opened his eyes with a groan.

His body was beat up far beyond how Takeru's body was. The armor on his entire body was blown off and the Tyrant property magical power had covered almost his entire body with burns. Although thanks to armor he didn't have broken bones, it was probably impossible for him to fight any longer.

"Nero, was it? Can't you fix it with your power?"

《"...shut up...I'm doing it..."》

A sulky voice had echoed in his head.

《"Your healing ability should be high, why are you dawdling with just this much."》

《"Shut up, idioot! I can't heal him even though I want to! It's your fault damn it! I can't go all out if Master's heart ain't set on revenge!"》

When Lapis interjected, Nero had become furious.

《"What are you doing Master! What paying back, don't screw around...! Don't you go saving this fool.. you disappointed me! My own revenge is undiminished yet!"》

"The one...to shut up is you, shitty gun... in the first place, don't you go worryin' 'bout me."

Kyouya forced a voice out.

When Takeru attempted to lend him a shoulder, Kyouya had shaken his hand off.

"If you've got time to bother yourself with me... go fight."

"But...!"

"Shut up. Be silent. I've repaid you what I owed. The rest is up to you...!"

Kyouya hit Takeru's chest and clenched his teeth.

"I won't die with just this... Akira is waiting for me...! I'll definitely go back...!"

"....."

"Buy some time until I recover... if you can't do it, I'll do it then...!"

Takeru looked into Kyouya's glaring eyes, and was relieved.

While Nero said the revenge in his heart had declined, this man's obsession didn't change in the least. He won't die. Even if he has to crawl, he'll survive.

"You have my thanks, Kyouya."

"Stop! That's disgusting!"

Smiling at the reply, Takeru stood up.

Passing through the rubble he walked towards the square that no longer retained its original form.

Kurogane Hayato stood in the same place as before.

"He's a man akin to a stray dog, but Kirigaya managed to withstand it, huh. Not bad."

Walking towards Hayato, Takeru had poised the sword to the side.

"Continuing? Kusanagi."

"Of course. I can't show myself to Kyouya like this. It would be another case if Kurogane-san passed me the document though."

"Can't do that. I decided that this information cannot be disclosed to anyone. Kusanagi, you have no reason to fight Ootori Sougetsu. Leave that man's treatment to me."

"....."

"It's same for Kusanagi Kiseki. There is no need for children to fight."

Although these were one-sided and authoritative words and he was called a child, strangely Takeru didn't feel a discomfort or sense of inferiority.

Just how long has it been since he was treated as a kid.

Fighting against Hayato, he understood one thing.

He had clearly realized it when he saw wounded Kyouya.

Kurogane Hayato, this man——*from the very beginning until now, hasn't fought seriously*.

In this fight until now he had plenty of opportunities to finish Takeru off. Takeru alone counted at least ten, Hayato should be able to take his life.

It was the same with Maximilian's particles explosion. Despite the fact it had hit Kyouya at zero distance, Kyouya was alive. His armor was just blown off and his skin burned. Lapis too had called referred to his injuries with "just this much", it meant that Hayato had suppressed that explosion's power.

This man didn't have any intention of killing them since the beginning.

What he tried was to show them the overwhelming difference in their strength, to make them give up on their rebellion and rescuing Kiseki. Killing Takeru wasn't his objective in the least.

Surely, he was trying to stop Takeru and others from fighting.

He was trying to make Takeru and others realize just how powerful the enemy is.

——Even if I hold back, you can't win.

That's what Hayato wanted to make him realize through combat.

In that case, what should he do?

That's obvious.

I too——will make you understand.

I too have strength required to defeat you.

As to say, the one to back off is you.

This man wasn't his enemy.

To Takeru, he was a wall.

Unless he breaks through this wall here, he won't be able to save Kiseki or defeat Ootori Sougetsu.

"...you sure talk whatever you please, I too, have something I want to say."

"....."

"I must save Kiseki. No one but me——can save her!"

These were words of Takeru who believed in himself.

There was no need to look for a reason to fight.

He was her brother, he had hurt her, he was unable to protect her.

That's why he'll save her. She might hate it, but he'll continue to outstretch his hand. She might escape, but he'll continue to chase after her.

That was all he could do.

Takeru stopped walking, taking form of a demon he readied his sword.

"Kusanagi Double-Edged style initiate, Kusanagi Takeru——I'll prove it to you! That there are things only I can save...!"

Hearing these words Hayato slightly furrowed his eyebrows and closed his eyes.

However, only for a moment.

When Hayato opened his eyes the next instant, in them there was a resolve not to show any mercy.

"Very well. I shall teach you, just how powerful are those people you intend to face, how abnormal they are. And then, give up——there is no need for you to know the truth of the world."

And, crossing the revolvers in both his hands he had expanded magical circle.

The jet-black and silver armor overlapped, Hayato's head was covered with steel.

"Inquisition's Zeroth Extermination Dark Riot Police's captain, Kurogane Hayato. Come at me——Kusanagi Takeru."

The pupils clad in armor had flashed with blue light.

In that moment, battle of the two had began.

The one who attacked first was Takeru. He assaulted the strongest EXE.

Tricks won't work. It'll be all diffused with the silver gun. I can only challenge him with my swordsmanship!

Bring it on, Takeru jumped horizontally in the middle of the run.

He pulled half of his body backwards, twisted his entire body and had released a thrust.

Unicorn's Destructive Lance.

A blow concentrating on one point had approached Hayato.

And Hayato——had stopped the thrust, catching the blade with one hand.

"!"

"Too slow!"

Immediately after hearing the voice, Takeru noticed he was in the sky.

The armor on his abdomen had cracked.

What was done to him? Was he kicked upwards?

"Whatever you do——is too slow!"

Before he realized Hayato had jumped and appeared right beside him, in the air.

As he tried to confirm his appearance in surprise, this time he was thrown into the ground.

"...damn...it...!!"

Takeru got up instantly and triggered Soumatou, then reading ahead Hayato's next attack he avoided to the right.

Immediately after that, Hayato's kick had burst into the ground. The ground had broken off and pebbles splattered all around.

He's fast, even if I use Soumatou!! I should raise my speed furth——?!

Even though the scenery around him was in slow motion, Hayato had approached Takeru at speed he was unable to follow.

——This is too slow too?!

Caligula's muzzle was pressed against his head.

And Takeru——

"NOT YEEEETTttttttt!!"

——Raised Soumatou's power even further.

Momentarily he reached the limit of speed and avoided before the bullet was fired.

Lowering his waist, he tried to deliver a blow to Hayato from below.

But——in front of him, once again was a gun's muzzle.

The silver barrel was that of Maximilian's.

It wasn't that Hayato had predicted Takeru would avoid Caligula and enter below him. Certainly, Hayato held Maximilian prepared after Takeru had avoided.

Not enough speed.

A silver magical bullet was fired. Were it be a direct hit, it could possibly even diffuse Witch Hunt form itself.

"Nghhdammmittt!!"

He twisted his neck, twisted his body, avoiding the silver bullet.

In order to increase his speed beyond the limit Takeru had overused his brain.

Faster, faster.

Takeru rolled on the ground after having the magical bullet graze his cheek.

Although it was just a fraction of a second during which he triggered Soumatou, his speed had far exceeded speed of sound and a shockwave was generated just from his movement. The recoil from the momentum was fierce and it took time to stop.

Hayato looked coldly at Takeru who had avoided and reloaded Maximilian with another bullet.

Maximilian must have needed to be reloaded after one shot.

"...so you raise your speed further, huh. However, that's not speed I can't keep up with."

Takeru stood up and when he tried to raise his sword,

——*ppam*!

Along with a shockwave, Hayato had appeared in front of him.

Seeing Hayato look down on him from right in front, Takeru was speechless.

"What can you do with just this much? You're a man who can't do anything unless you rely on Mistilteinn."

"...ah...uahh...!!"

"The ones you want to stand against are enemies of this level....! I'll have you comprehend it...!"

The moment Hayato's face distorted with anger——it had begun.

One-sided violence. One-sided destruction. One-sided show of power difference.

Attacks surpassing speed of sound have assaulted Takeru's body.

The attacks themselves were simple. Moving his body like whirlwind, using both hands, both legs, head, and firing magical bullets with Caligula.

It was as if Takeru received a barrage from all directions at once.

He couldn't see them. He couldn't catch up with them. He couldn't comprehend them.

His entire body was breaking.

《"Host! We can only activate God-Hunter form now! At this rate you will really die! The magical power to maintain Witch Hunter too is... no longer...!"》

In the middle of the storm of violence he couldn't even feel pain from, Lapis' voice had echoed.

He knew that ever since Hayato had started his continuous attacks, Lapis had focused on strengthening defense and nerves in his entire body. The only reason he had survived these sonic attacks was thanks to her. Were he in the ordinary Witch Hunter form state he would have died long time ago.

Kurogane Hayato's brain had the same processing power Takeru had when he used Soumatou.

Moreover, for Hayato that was a normal state. This high-speed world was the world Hayato was seeing.

There was no way to beat him. There was no other way to overthrow him other than to rely on God Hunter form's power.

However, Takeru's will had firmly denied it. Unable to speak out in his mind, he shook his head in response to Lapis who wanted to trigger God Hunter form.

We can't. God Hunter form isn't something to use out of desperation. That really is the last resort. It can't be used unless they are confident of their victory with it.

Now, it still isn't the time to use it.

The continuous attacks have ceased and Hayato grasped Takeru's collar.

Glare, clenched teeth, Hayato hit Takeru as he pleased.

"Go hide together with your comrades and don't come out until war is over. That's the correct choice you ought to take. Your life is not just your any more. You have comrades who want to protect you, don't you. Why can't you understand that the best way is for you and your comrades not to fight...?! You fighting on, means forsaking everything!"

"——"

"I have nothing else to lose! That's why I'll shoulder everything!"

"———"

"If you think about your comrades, about the world——don't fight any more!"

With contradictions and ego, hopes and request, a blow with entire body weight behind it had pierced into Takeru's cheek.

Takeru's body was blown away like a meteor.

Deciding it's settled, Hayato was about to close his eyes.

However——placing his feet on the ground Takeru had stopped by scrapping the ground.

"……!"

He didn't fall over. After receiving a merciless blow, Takeru stood firmly.

His consciousness must have been fading away already.

His body and spirit weren't in a proper state. He should have been ragged out.

And yet——Takeru stood firm.

"……HAA……Aa——"

A breathless groan had spilled from Takeru's mouth.

His beat-up body attempted to naturally sheathe his sword.

In his head, there were only remnants of thought.

His thinking had moved away from that of a human, from that of a beast, making him become an existence only seeking one desire.

It was as if he had become an existence like a ruthless demon continuously fulfilling his desires.

What he sought.

Was speed.

It wasn't enough. His speed wasn't sufficient. The factor required to defeat the man in front of him was pure swordsmanship. Out of it, it was just the swordsmanship's speed.

——Soumatou. The prohibited technique of Double-Edged style.

After Takeru had learned Soumatou, his Master, Orochi had said.

『"See, humans have their movement restricted by the limiter in their brains. It's there so that their bodies and brain doesn't break. That's something you can't do anythin' about with your will. It's same for Soumatou, that too has a limit. That limit, is so to speak the last limit. It can be said that this limit is the proof of being a human."』

If the limiter is the proof of being a human.

——Then, what happens to a human once it's exceeded?

『"He dies. Humans can't withstand it."』

Takeru from the past wondered about it after hearing the story from Orochi.

Why is it that ceasing to be a human meant the person would die, he wondered.

Was it possible, if one would obtain a body that's not of a human, he wondered.

In that case, what should I do?

It wasn't that Takeru recalled memories of the past now.

Like a beast, he just sought speed.

The speed to reach the monster.

——Faster————even faster.

Faster faster faster faster faster faster faster.

Faster faster faster even faster————not enough————not enough not enough not enough ————reach reach reach reach reachreachreachreach.

——Where?

Nowhere specific——just, faster, single-mindedly faster. Faster and ahead, faster.

《 "Host! That's enough! Please fall over! Please gi——ve————u ——————————————————————————"》

Lapis' voice echoed in his head had distorted.

No, it fell behind. He couldn't hear it any longer.

Her voice had slowed down. The sound had slowed down.

The clouded over world he could see had stopped.

Speechless Hayato had stopped.

Takeru could see the moisture in the air. He could see sound echoing in the space. He could see a single grain of light moving in the air.

Everything other than light had stopped, it was a beautiful and fantastic sight.

Seeing this scenery, his thinking of a monster just seeking speed had returned to sanity.

——Ahh, this area isn't one humans should reach.

——I can't go there. I need to go back.

——I need to save.

——I need to survive and come back.

When he finally noticed, Takeru had moved in the unmoving world.

He clenched the handle, grasped the sheath. Sunk low on his leg, his body falling forward.

He pulled out——the sword.

"Kusanagi, Double-Edged, style——"

In a world he couldn't hear his own voice in, Takeru,

——Had released the strike.

That attack he wasn't aware of hadn't been written about in the Kusanagi Double-Edged style's book of secrets.

The reason for that was, because it's inventor was Orochi. He had been dissatisfied that there was no secret moves in Double-Edged style and had devised it by himself.

Desiring speed alone, going beyond human limits, leaving the sound behind, simply aiming for the "light" that had boasted of it's ultimate speed.

What was born in the process. was this technique.

Kusanagi Double-Edged style's secret art——Kusanagi Sword.

The time had returned to the world the instant he had pulled the sword out of its sheath, aiming for Hayato.

No one in the location knew what had occurred.

Slowly, Hayato turned around to look at Takeru.

He had turned around to look at Takeru who imperceptibly, instantly moved behind him.

And, the moment he saw Takeru's back——armor on Hayato's chest had crumbled and blood burst out.

At the same time a loud roar had resounded from tens of meters of ground, crossing the point Hayato stood in.

Moreover, the arm of Takeru who had swung the sword was hit by the blast of air and turned into a horrible state.

A roar after roar, destruction after destruction had lagged behind Takeru's strike.

The world had regained its silence a five seconds later.

"...gha...kghh...hh! What, just now...!"

Having a great tear in his chest, Hayato fell on his knees. Even though his head knew that he had received a godspeed blow, he still couldn't believe it.

It was a miracle he was still alive.

When he punched Takeru's face and saw him stand firm without falling, Hayato had a bad feeling.

One could say he had a foreboding, he felt Takeru wasn't being sane and had concentrated both Maximilian's and Caligula's magical power on his chest to devote himself to defense.

The premonition was right on target.

Even Hayato could only see Takeru disappear.

An attack at impossible speed. Not only it had surpassed the barrier of sound, it had reached further, further and further. An unavoidable slash.

An inhuman technique devised by Kusanagi Double-Edged style... that was an attack on a completely different level from what Kurogane Hayato could catch up to.

"...so he surpassed me...in that instant."

Squinting, Hayato had realized he was defeated by Takeru.

In that instant, the height Kusanagi Takeru's existence had been elevated to, was immeasurable. Whatever was ahead, whether it was just temporary or not, Takeru had surpassed Hayato.

Although Hayato intended to have him submit and surrender, the tables were turned and he had ended up surrendering.

Closing his narrowed eyes, Hayato exhaled.

He was unable to stop him.

This defeat, could be called the *first step towards on the road to destruction of this world*.

Hayato, who had read the through the document was convinced of it.

"I... have nothing more to say."

He released the Witch Hunter form and stood up.

Although he received more damage than he imagined, it wasn't enough to stop him from moving.

Moving his aching body, Hayato walked towards where Takeru had been. Takeru was lying down on the ground, beside him was Lapis who had used the remaining magical power to heal his body.

When she noticed Hayato, Lapis had stood up and spread her arms as if to protect Takeru.

"....."

It was the first time he had seen a Relic Eater protecting its Master this desperately. Caligula and Maximilian rather than trust Hayato, have sworn allegiance to him instead. Making a contract with "Hero Vessel" was just a natural instinct of a Magical Heritage. They didn't show any human reactions like this azure-colored girl had.

It was a mystery. The sword that led to ruin alone behaving just like a human would.

This girl and this boy... maybe, possibly. Hayato thought.

"...I have no intention of attacking him any more."

"....."

"Protect him to your best. *So that this man doesn't go down the wrong path...* not as a god-slaying sword. but as a human."

Hayato took out the document from his pocket.

And, at that time he heard multiple sounds of footsteps come from the other side of the rubble.

He could tell by the footsteps. It was the 35th platoon bunch.

"......! Kusanagi!"

"Takeru?!"

Ouka had shown herself first, seeing fallen Takeru she had turned the muzzle at Hayato without any hesitation. Next was Mari who expanded a magical circle, entering battle readiness.

After that came Ikaruga who glared at Hayato and Usagi who snuggled up to Takeru.

"...p-please stop, no more than this...!"

Usagi had clung to Takeru as if to protect him.

At the same time, a presence behind him appeared.

"...made you wait, bastardd...! Who the fuck is a stray dog...?!"

Hayato could tell that after being healed to an extent he could move, Kyouya had poised Nero behind him.

"....."

In this situation, Hayato calmly looked up at the sky.

Closing his eyes, he imagined their fate.

He imagined Kusanagi Takeru's fate.

With this sword... and these comrades... possibly... Kusanagi Takeru might move on without inviting destruction...

He had slight hopes of that.

Possibly, maybe... it was the first time he used such words.

Hayato made a small smile.

Ouka made a surprised expression.

It was the first time for her to see Hayato smiling.

"...fine already. It's my loss. Take Mineshiro's information and go."

After saying so, Hayato threw Mineshiro Kazuma's document.

Usagi hurriedly caught it.

Whether Takeru was to read the document or not, he wouldn't withdraw anyway. That's what Hayato learned in this fight.

He had no idea how Kusanagi Takeru would move after knowing the truth, but in any case, this boy won't stop. Trying to stop him was pointless.

"....."

But, it would be best not to let them know.

This fate was too heavy for him. Hayato could tell what anguish had awaited him in the future.

Hayato had taken out one more thing from his pocket and fired it at Ouka.

"Ootori Ouka. This too."

It was a locket.

Ouka caught it with one hand and looked at the locket in puzzlement.

"Inside, I wrote where I hid Mephistopheles' body."

"...wha..."

"You probably need it. You can go and recover it."

Despite surprise, Ouka looked at Hayato with complex feelings in her eyes.

Hayato could feel her confusion and gratitude.

".....captain Kurogane."

"I'm no longer your captain. This guy is your captain."

He looked down at Takeru.

In his gaze as he looked down on Takeru, dwelled something similar to nostalgia.

Hayato thought. This boy, will walk a different path from me or Mineshiro Kazuma.

Having stronger ego, law than anyone, being more selfish than anyone, walking forward more firm than anyone, he would pierce through anything. Hayato didn't know what awaited him at his destination. Of course, if Takeru mistakes his path, Hayato will judge him immediately. He will have to be executed. For the sake of the world.

The information in Kazuma's document, *was for the sake of that*.

Hayato raised his face, he saw the platoon members look at Hayato curiously.

"Hurry up and escape from this place. Very soon, it'll be swallowed by the Sanctuary."

Immediately after Hayato said that, the watch-type devices on Ouka and others' arms have sounded an alarm.

It was an alarm informing them that Akashic Hazard was going to flow into the time zone.

As told by Hayato, Ouka had held Takeru together with Usagi who was beside him, lending him a shoulder.

Hayato turned around on his heel and attempted to leave the location.

"W-where are you going to go?"

Ouka's voice had come from behind him.

Hayato didn't answer. There was nothing else to tell them.

Just like Kusanagi Takeru, he just had to move forward on his own path. When he thought that and attempted to move forward, something stood there.

"Ghh...gyahagh...sab...me...eee..."

It was an EXE member in a mass-produced Relic Eater's Witch Hunter form.

He could tell by a single glance at the steel-colored armor.

It was one of the inquisitors monitoring Hayato.

"What's that...? Isn't he... weird?"

Feeling a strange air, Mari thought of it as eerie.

Hayato sharply narrowed his eyes and glared at the EXE member's body.

Something like dark red blood vessels has eroded his body. And it wasn't just the body, even the armor was dark red and wavy like meat.

At a glance Hayato realized what was it.

Hyakki Yakou. The appearance of a human that had it's cell transplanted into him.

"Hurry and go! Run away!"

Once again he materialized Maximilian and Caligula in his hand, cladding himself in armor.

Ouka and others seemed confused and didn't move.

Meanwhile, the human's form was swallowed in the flesh and ignoring the mass had overflowed with red meat.

"Gghy-gghii...gii——GYAHHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAA!"

With a crackling sound the red meat continued to form a huge human-like shape. It let out a frightened voice like a baby crying at night.

Rather than form a muddy stream like before, it had retained a shape of strong meat.

As if——it was a giant demon. Since Kusanagi Kiseki had become able to control Hyakki Yakou, she must have become able to fix it into a proper shape.

Hayato yelled.

"Go! Don't dawdle! I won't forgive you if you die here!"

After hearing his angry voice, the platoon members had begun to move.

Kyouya had carried Takeru and everyone had moved away from Hayato at full speed.

Ouka alone had turned around to look time after time.

"....."

From the distant sky a black storm was imminent. The visualization of Akashic Hazard was reflected in this manner.

There was no time left. If he's not instantly killed by Hyakki Yakou, he will die swallowed up by the Sanctuary.

Hayato smiled and with a "bring it on" he raised his guns.

All of this was contrived by Ootori Sougetsu. He put Hyakki Yakou into his subordinates and activated it when the location was about to be swallowed-up by the Akashic Hazard.

In order to erase Hayato here.

That's why, Hayato laughed.

Try it all you want, it meant.

"I——won't die so easily!"

Wit the black storm approaching, Kurogane Hayato had confronted the menace with all he had.

The reason why Kurogane Hayato didn't want to pass the document to Takeru.

It was because Takeru was the contractor of the god-slaying sword.

Written in the document left behind by Mineshiro Kazuma was the truth of how the world is being maintained and how was it born.

Mineshiro Kazuma had joined Heretic Alliance and in the "Fragment of Mythological World" he had obtained a variety of unbelievable information.

That this world had been completed through collision with mythological world, and is a mistaken world.

That magic of this world, is part of the power once used by gods.

That magic didn't exist before the worlds have collided.

That a world in which magic exists cannot be maintained without a god.

And in the end, Mineshiro Kazuma wrote a mention on Ootori Sougetsu.

Ootori Sougetsu is this world's god.

Ootori Sougetsu is not to be killed.

If Ootori Sougetsu is killed, the world will be destroyed.

Therefore, that man's goal is *his own death*——

——The god-slaying sword cannot be allowed to form a contract with one that possesses inhuman soul.

Epilogue

In this city that has Inquisition's headquarters in it there was a very strict atmosphere, since the entire world had entered war.

However, the civilians were living their usual, stupidly peaceful life.

It's not a big deal. What war, it's happening in some far-away land. Even if witches attack us, the inquisition will do something about it. This city is safest. The witches had lost once, they won't win with humanity.

Despite various incidents that have happened in the past, people did not change.

Not everyone thought the same, but only about a half had evacuated.

This place, having the Inquisition's headquarters is safest. That's what they thought.

And at such times——the war had suddenly spread.

In front of a drunk that in one hand was holding souvenirs he brought back home, humans wearing robes had suddenly appeared along with a flash of light.

In front of female high school students slandering their class mate, suddenly appeared people clad in red, knightly clothing.

A boy looking at the sky in daze saw a giant shadow stand on top of the building.

The civilians in the city had seen appearance of strange humans and giants.

Still, the people living in the city didn't panic.

They didn't escape from reality, they thought of a reason for it and pretended not to see it.

"Must be some kind of festival."

"They must be shooting a film."

"Some insane group of people."

Exposing their lack of sense of crisis, they haven't noticed their lives were in danger.

In the corner of the city, walking through the city after separating from its parent, a small crying child had bumped into a white woman. When the little boy had looked up, there stood a white... pure white woman.

"...Mamaa?"

The woman had smiled lightly towards the boy and pat his head.

She bent over and said to him.

"I'm sorry. I cannot go, look for your mother."

The woman had embraced the boy and pat his back.

"But it's all right. You will surely meet your mother soon."

"...why?"

"Because world is going to be reborn."

Smiling to the boy who understood nothing, the woman stood up.

Imperceptibly, next to the woman stood a man in kimono.

"...are you prepared? Gungnir."

Looking with demon-like red eyes at the woman, the man said.

The woman had erased the smile, narrowed her eyes sharply like a blade and joined her hands together in front of her chest.

As if to pray to God.

"——Yes, Host. To end and remake the world."

In that moment the whole area had been wrapped in a pure white magical circle and a tragedy had rained down on the city.

* * *

Watching the sight of the entire city being drunk in the sea of screams, a man in priestly clothing had took a deep breath and spread his arms wide.

"Ahh...hhaa! I can't bear it... this airrrr... how much have I longed for this day to comee..."

Exaggeratedly he raised his voice as if singing, his blonde hair swayed in the wind.

The man with a complacent look put the rosary on his chest between his teeth and strongly chewed on it. After chewing it enough, he had swallowed it loudly.

"Tonight, the despair of the century is upon us! It's the beginning of a caaaaaarniivaaaaaaaaaallllll! The Hexennacht is beginning... HA!"

With flushed cheeks he laughed complacently and sent his feelings to someone else through the darkness of the night.

"Now, what will you do? What will you do what will you do what?! Can you save it——everything! If you come to save it, I'll come at my fuuuuullllllll force to stand in your way! After all, that's the very reason I live for!"

Even though no one was listening, the man had loudly declared so towards the sky.

* * *

Inside AntiMagic Academy Chairman's room, Sougetsu looked at the city without change.

Sitting in the chair, he was elegantly drinking brandy, dressed as if he was going out for a holiday night he stared at the city whose streets have filled with agonizing cries.

"...it's begun."

Behind him, as he made a gentle and relieved expression as he raised the brandy to his mouth, stood a red girl.

Sougetsu had casually raised one hand and held it out towards the girl.

The girl had expressionlessly overlapped his hand with her own.

"Now... it's your turn, Kiseki-chan."

As if to respond to his call, the girl's eyes shone red.

The very culmination of variant had raised a wail..

In the city. In the mountains. In the rivers. In the sea. In order to swallow everything, it sung a song of joy.

And smiling, the girl spoke to her beloved——

"Onii-chan, wait for me——I'll destroy everything right now."

——Her beloved brother, inviting him to the deepest darkness.

Afterwords

It has been a while. It's Yanagimi Touki.

Celebration! 10 volumes reached!

The unthinkable double digit. Honestly, I didn't think I'll be able to continue it for so long.

While I'm a very minor light novel writer, I know how tough is the industry and when I have started the series I have resolved myself to a certain extent writing in a way I'll be able to end it anywhere.

"It seems like you'll be able to release three volumes."

I was really happy when I was told that by the person in charge, after that it was five volumes, eight volumes, I had come up to this point as if walking up the stairs. And like that, I have surpassed 10 volumes, being able to continue it for a little longer.

I'm very thankful. All of this, is thanks to the readers who have followed it so far.

Now then, we've reached 10th volume. The captain of EXE that didn't have much screen time so far, Kurogane Hayato had received his own confrontation.

Even so, this volume, it ended up having a high ratio of men unbelievable to happen in this series.

Didn't at least eight men have appeared?

No...it really... stinks of men...

But I think that at times it might be good to have a volume like that. It's already the 10th volume after all.

This time, I especially liked Usagi's sniping scene.

It could be thought as of a sniping that makes her inhuman, but having a sniper that goes beyond human level might or might not have actually happened before. Well, sniping from such a ultra-long distance at a target moving at high speed surely would make her inhuman...

Just like this time's sub-title Witch Hunt War (first part) says, it's continuing.

The next volume would be having the magic side clashing for real against the Inquisition's side.

Look forward to it!

Since there's a little bit space left, I should fill the rest of the page with boobs talk... is what I want to say, I wonder. I mean, I'm not being forced here by anyone and it's a customary thing to let authors write something from themselves... though it's not like anyone is reluctant to do it. It always ends with irresponsible jokes and weird stories, the authors always end up averting their eyes whenever they attempt to re-read it after forcing themselves to write those...

——What agony is it to bear!! I cannot hesitate just because of some jokes! It is something I have to do from the start until the very end!

Now, let's go! Explode my libido! Overflow my passion!

This time's theme is!

♂ boobies.

——Sorry, impossible (vomits blood).

It appears I can only go this far. Heck, rather than to write about manboobs, it's several tens of thousands more meaningful to write about the mediamix, I think. On the topic of anime, there's an official announcement on the band of the ninth volume.

And, the ones responsible for its production has been determined to be Silver Link-sama!

Yayy! Let's celebrate!

At this stage I don't know how much details can I reveal, but the scenariowriting and character design are steadily progressing. Although I kept you wait for a long time, despite my poor ability as an author I'll do my best to write a good work, so please wait for more news!

Now the credits. K-sama in charge and Kippu-sensei in charge of illustrations, Yasamura Yohei-sensei to whom I'm indebted for comic version. Everyone in Fujimi Shoubou's editing department. All of the people engaged in the animation of the work.

And to those who have taken this book in their hands, you have my thanks.

It's still continuing! Let's meet in 11th volume〜.

Yanagimi Touki